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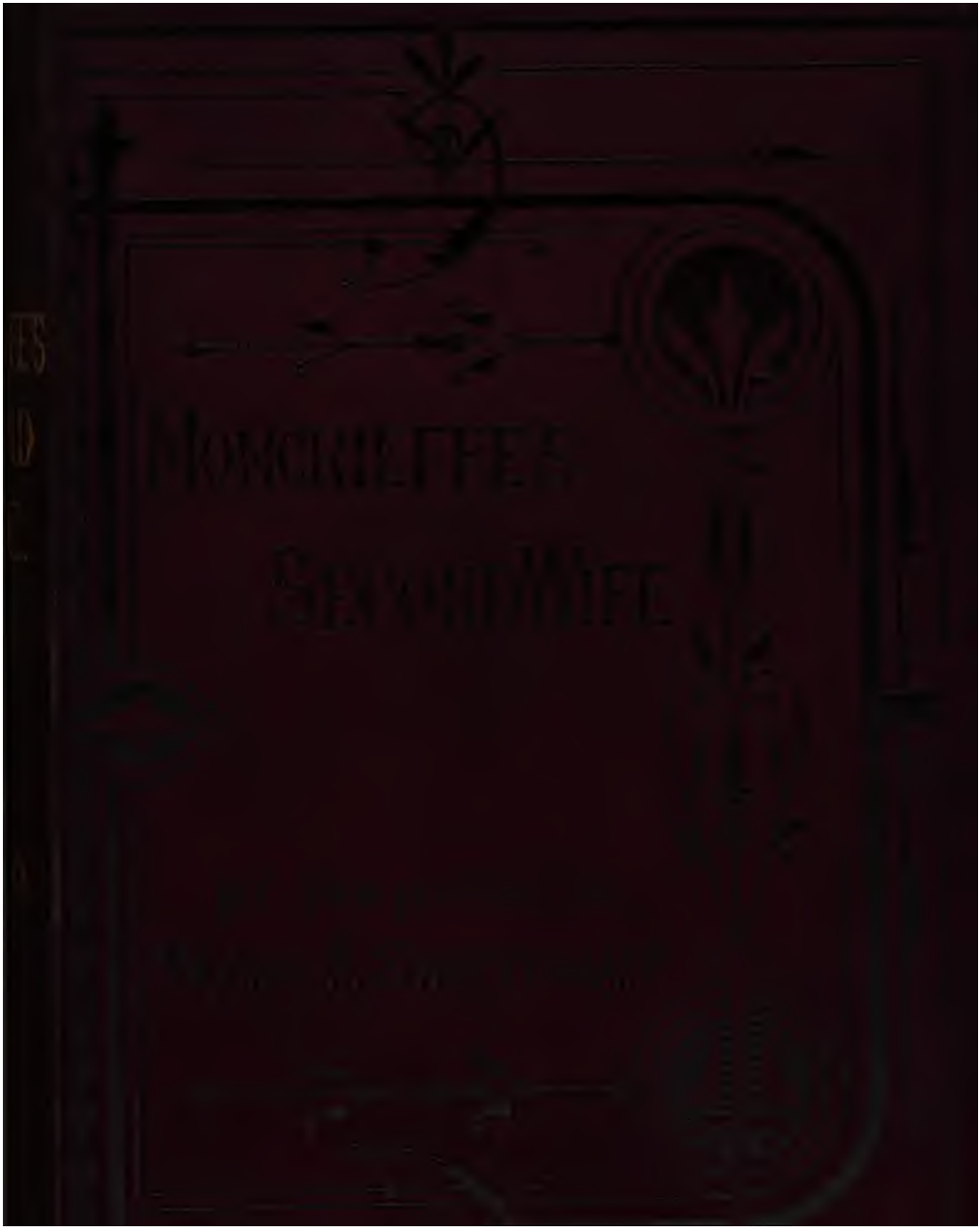

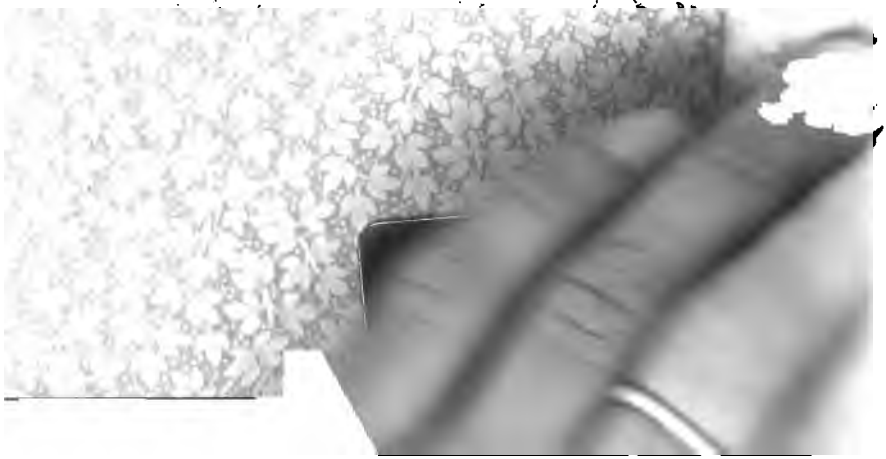

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MONCRIEFFE'S SECOND WIFE.

A NOVEL.

BY

LOLO,

AUTHOR OF "WOOING A SWEETBRIAR," "A CRUEL SECRET,"
"WAS HERS THE FAULT?" ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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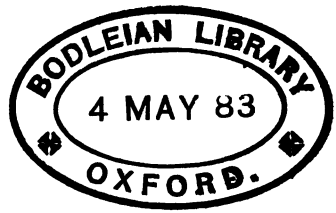

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MONCRIEFFE'S SECOND WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

MRS M'MICKIE OF DRUM.

"I HAVE seen Mrs M'Mickie during my visit to Charles" (Sir Charles de Vere) "last summer," said Mrs Greville, as she sat by her niece's side in the barouche which was conveying them to Mrs M'Mickie's lodgings,—for rich though the latter was, she never committed the extravagance of taking a house when she came up to town.

"And what sort of a lady is she?" asked Constance.

"Oh, she requires humouring," replied Mrs Greville, with an air that implied that *she* had

humoured the old lady very successfully. "She is peculiar, certainly, but it is easy for a person of tact to manage her. I got on with her very well, though I only saw her twice. You will have to be a little more careful what you say to her, Harry, than you are with me. *She* won't make any allowance for your youth and thoughtlessness as I do."

"I don't see any necessity for making such a fuss about her," said perverse Harry.

"Oh, my dear, think what twelve thousand a-year is!" cried Mrs Greville.

"I don't want it," replied Harry scornfully. "And even if I did I wouldn't fawn on the old lady to get it."

"Of course not," interposed Constance hastily. "But I don't see why Aunt Fanny should take it for granted that you mean to be anything but civil to the poor old lady."

"Oh, as to that," sniffed Mrs Greville, "I am sure I am very fond of Sir Eldred; and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see him made a rich man."

"I daresay," laughed Harry maliciously; "he would have more money to spend on Roman scarfs for you."

"Oh, indeed, I have often remarked that poor people are far more generous than rich ones," replied Mrs Greville composedly. "I assure you I am always getting presents from

the young men of my acquaintance; but Eldred, who is so badly off, poor fellow, would ruin himself outright over one trinket if I let him; while those who have money confine themselves to flowers, and trifles of that sort."

"I suppose it was one of your juvenile beaux who gave you those beautiful geraniums?" said Harry, who had ordered the flowers expressly for her own use to-day.

"Ah, yes; they are very pretty," murmured the widow easily.

"It is strange I did not notice them when you first came in," pursued Harry relentlessly. "It is very provoking; I ordered some geraniums just like those to be sent to me to-day; but when Eugenie brought me the basket of flowers out of the boudoir, there were no geraniums in it. You were writing there,—did you see the flowers?"

"Ah, my dear, what a pity! If I had only known you wished to wear them! But I thought they were merely some flowers that Constance had ordered for her boudoir table, and I never dreamt that I was stealing when I pinned a few in my dress."

"Oh, it doesn't signify," said Harry loftily, and just then they reached the house where Mrs M'Mickie was living, and the footman, after knocking at the door, proceeded to inform them that Mrs M'Mickie was at home.

"I suppose I may come in too as I am acquainted with Mrs M'Mickie," said Mrs Greville; and without waiting for an answer, she sprang lightly from the carriage after her niece.

They were shown upstairs to the drawing-room, where they found Mrs M'Mickie seated in awful state on her sofa, surrounded by a group of admiring toadies—a poor cousin named Miss Patsey Trotter, whom she had charitably provided with a home, and who was a kindly, well-meaning, nervous little woman, with an unfortunate aptitude for always doing and saying the wrong thing at the wrong time; the Rev. Alexander Macdougal, a harmless, fresh-complexioned young man, and the minister of the Established Kirk at Moncrieffe; a dowdy-looking lady, who was evidently only a caller, since she had her out-door things on; and last, but by no means least, Sir Eldred Glendower himself. The three former were grouped round the lady on the sofa, with a solemn reverence in their attitudes, which was as oppressive as it was absurd; Sir Eldred alone looked at his ease, as he leant back languidly in the easiest chair in the room, with his legs crossed and his head thrown far back. No one else would have ventured thus to sit at ease in Mrs M'Mickie's presence; but Sir Eldred was a privileged person, and perhaps

the old lady liked him all the better because he was not stiff and constrained in her presence like most people. She herself was a little, wiry old woman of seventy, with small, keen grey eyes, white corkscrew curls, and a yellow, parchmenty complexion. She had a dignified and even majestic deportment, which sat oddly on her diminutive person; while to sum up the list of her charms it need only be added that, like Barham's Mistress Winifred Price, she—

> "... was not over young;
> Had very short legs, and a very long tongue."

She sat perfectly still and stared at the newcomers till they got within a couple of yards of her, when she rose stiffly, and without advancing a step, inclined her head slightly to Constance, who was in advance.

"I must introduce myself to you as Mrs Moncrieffe—Bruce Moncrieffe's wife," said the latter, extending her hand smilingly to the old lady, who put out hers stiffly to meet it, repeating,—

"Bruce Moncrieffe's wife, are you?"

"Don't you remember *me*, Mrs M'Mickie?" said Mrs Greville, here pushing herself forward.

"I can't say I do," replied the old lady, after staring at her for a minute.

"Why, I am Mrs Greville, Sir Charles de

Vere's sister—don't you remember my calling on you with Lady de Vere last summer? And this is my niece, who has lately married your neighbour, Mr Moncrieffe. I came with her to introduce her to you."

"Hum! Will you sit down?" was all the reply vouchsafed, as Mrs M'Mickie reseated herself bolt upright on her sofa.

Mrs Greville subsided with a heightened colour into the chair which Sir Eldred placed for her; while the Rev. Mr Macdougal hastened to hand one to Mrs Moncrieffe, who accepted it with a smile that set his unsophisticated heart in an unwonted flutter.

Poor man! it was seldom that any smiles sweeter than those of Mrs M'Mickie and the various elderly ladies who resided with her, fell upon him.

"And so you're Bruce Moncrieffe's new wife?" said Mrs M'Mickie, after a pause, during which she had not seemed to look at Constance or anyone else.

"Yes; and this is his eldest daughter, Harry," said Constance.

"Hum!" remarked Mrs M'Mickie, glancing grimly towards Harry. "What do you mean by giving her a boy's name?"

"I didn't give—she has always been called Harry since she was a child," replied Constance gently.

"Ay; she's been brought up by that foolish body, Mrs Fortescue," remarked Mrs M'Mickie gloomily. "It's a real good thing Bruce Moncrieffe has married again. I always told him he ought to do so. I would never have looked at either of his girls so long as they were under Mrs Fortescue's charge. It's a great responsibility you've undertaken in marrying a man with children."

"I know it is," said Constance, flushing.

"Well, well, you're too young and handsome for your post, to my mind; but you look as if you'd more sense in you than Moncrieffe's first wife. She was a poor, foolish creature, and her mother was as like her as one pea is to another."

After this there was an awkward silence, to break which Constance presently remarked that they were having lovely weather.

"I don't like heat," replied Mrs M'Mickie curtly.

She was rather taken by the young wife's gentle, rather serious manner and sweet expression; but she fancied she had shown this too openly in her last speech, and felt bound to snub her a little now to atone for the compliment she had just paid her.

"Don't you?" proceeded Mrs Moncrieffe quietly. "I know a good many people find it trying. I suppose it makes you feel languid?"

"I am never *ill* (I say it thankfully), if you mean that," snapped Mrs M'Mickie, holding herself very erect, and gazing straight along the bridge of her nose, which she elevated at an angle that conveyed her glance considerably over Constance's head.

She was accustomed to maintain that no one need ever be *unwell* unless they liked. *Ill* they might be; but if not ill, then they must be altogether well. She held the words *languid*, faint, hysterical, etc., in abhorrence, and regarded all those who employed them as fools; and as none of her own household ever ventured to hint to her that her judgment, like all things human, might be fallible, she had got into a disagreeable way of laying down the law upon this and many other subjects, and was utterly intolerant to anyone who chanced to take an opposite view of the subject to herself.

"You are very fortunate," sighed Mrs Greville, who saw that something was wrong, and flattered herself that, by her tact, she could set things on a pleasant footing again, "Now, *I* have such dreadful nerves; and the heat, and all my dissipation, is quite knocking me up, I can assure you," and again the little lady sighed plaintively.

Nerves! dissipation! knocked up! Mrs M'Mickie scarcely knew which of these chal-

lenges to pick up first, so sorely did each one irritate her never very amiable temper. She slowly lowered her nose till her eyes met Mrs Greville's, and after regarding her for a few minutes in majestic silence, she observed, shortly,—

"There are no such things as nerves."

"Oh, but indeed there are," Mrs Greville was beginning, when Sir Eldred, who had been talking to Mr Macdougal, gave her foot a hasty touch with his toe, and struck in,—

"Talking of heat, my aunt is bent upon dragging me to the Royal Academy to-morrow afternoon. Isn't it cruel in this weather! Dear ladies do, I beseech you, assure her that she will die of suffocation if she persists in going."

"How funny, I am going to-morrow," cried Mrs Greville. "Do let me call for you in my carriage, Mrs M'Mickie, and we can go together."

"Hum!" remarked Mrs M'Mickie, and then relapsed into silence, which Mrs Greville was pleased to take for consent.

"I suppose you hardly remember Harry—eh?" said Constance pleasantly. "She was quite a child when you saw her last."

"Hum," again observed Mrs M'Mickie, fixing her eyes severely upon the girl's rather striking costume of crimson and white (Harry

insisted on dressing herself, and though her taste was rather more striking than Constance quite approved, she was obliged to confess that the bright colours suited the girl very well), which she had been scanning for some time out of the corners of her eyes, with inward wrath. For full a minute she continued to gaze at her in ominous silence, then she asked sharply,—

"What do you call that thing on your head?"

"What thing?" asked Harry innocently, raising her hand to feel for the "thing" alluded to, though she was perfectly aware that it was her red velvet, white-feathered bonnet that was meant.

"That red and white bunch you've got stuck on the back of your head."

"Don't you like it?" asked Harry, raising her eyebrows. "It is very pretty, though *you* mayn't think so; and I paid three guineas for it only yesterday."

"Three guineas for a hat!" echoed Mrs M'Mickie in horror, and in truth the sum did sound something fabulous to her unsophisticated ears.

"Constance paid five for hers," laughed Harry carelessly, nodding at the dainty nest of white feathers nestling on the top of her step-mother's golden head.

"Five guineas for a hat!—three guineas for a thing like that!" ejaculated the old lady, lifting up her hands.

"Excuse me, Mrs M'Mickie, but the *thing* which I wear on my head calls itself a bonnet," said Harry pertly.

"To my mind it looks more like a turban than anything else," said Mrs M'Mickie decisively; "certainly, however, I should have called it a hat."

"Hats and bonnets are very much alike now," said Constance soothingly; and little Miss Trotter, who had hitherto preserved a respectful silence, here struck in,—

"So they are, Mrs Moncrieffe; and living down in the country as we do, and never seeing a well-dressed lady from one year's end to another—"

"Patsey! hold your tongue," said Mrs M'Mickie sternly, and poor Miss Trotter subsided into alarmed silence.

"We certainly don't see bonnets of that description in Scotland," continued the amiable hostess sourly. "There we still labour under the old-fashioned idea that bonnets were intended as modest coverings for the head; but *here* the girls just stick a little bit of something bright at the very back of their heads to make men stare at them, and call it a bonnet!"

"I certainly call mine a bonnet," laughed Harry saucily. "A *bonnet à la Vallière.*"

"*La Vallière!* and you can wear a thing that bears the name of a woman like that?" asked Mrs M'Mickie, in a tone too awful to describe. "Though for that matter the name suits the bonnet remarkably well," she added witheringly.

"Dear, dear," laughed Harry lightly. "Why nearly every hat in London has some such name."

Mrs M'Mickie groaned, and half closed her eyes, as she remarked in her most awful tones,—

"The age of decency is past!"

There was an uncomfortable silence, in the midst of which Miss Patsey remarked naively,—

"Lawks a mercy! you don't say so?"

Mrs M'Mickie half opened her eyes to cast a look of pious fury at her cousin, and before she could close them again Harry asked (just as Constance was hoping to make her escape),—

"I suppose you have been to see the new play at Drury Lane, Mrs M'Mickie. Every one is talking of it."

"I never go to—to such places," replied Mrs M'Mickie, turning livid at what she justly supposed to be an intentional insult.

"Don't you?" said Harry, quietly ignoring the imploring glance which Constance cast at

her; "then I think you are very foolish. I am sure that if you once went to a good play you would like nothing better. *I* perfectly adore theatres."

By this time Mrs M'Mickie's feelings had got almost beyond her control, and in spite of her desperate efforts to appear majestically dignified, her voice would quiver with suppressed rage as she said solemnly,—

"And pray, Miss Harriet, what would you say if you were to fall down *dead* in a theatre?"

"Well, really," laughed Harry, shrugging her shoulders gracefully, "I almost think I would rather fall down dead in a theatre than in a bad temper."

After that it was hopeless to attempt to soften Mrs M'Mickie's outraged feelings, and after a minute of awful silence, during which Miss Trotter and Mr Macdougal scarcely ventured to breathe, Constance rose to take her leave. She had taken no part in the above-mentioned passage of arms, and perhaps something in her face showed that she regretted her step-daughter's words, for as she bid her good-bye, Mrs M'Mickie condescended to present her with a tract, and expressed a hope that she would read it.

"Won't you give me one too?" laughed Harry.

"I never cast my pearls before swine," was the civil rejoinder.

"In this instance I certainly think the swine might be excused for not appreciating them," retorted the girl, as she left the room.

Sir Eldred, who had vainly sought to interpose between the old and the young lady during this scene, was not sorry to make his escape from the presence of the incensed Mrs M'Mickie, under pretence of escorting the visitors to their carriage. When, after several minutes, he returned for his hat, Mrs M'Mickie was seated in silent fury on her sofa, and the others were looking awed and alarmed.

"That is the most graceless young woman I ever saw," she remarked, abruptly, at last.

"Which one?" asked Patsey stupidly.

"The daughter—she they call *Harry*, of course," snapped Mrs M'Mickie tartly.

"Oh, I was sure you could not mean Mrs Moncrieffe," cried Miss Trotter effusively. "I'm sure I thought her the very sweetest looking young lady I ever saw."

"She certainly appeared to be a pearl of great price," chimed in the Rev. Alexander.

"What do *you* know about pearls, I should like to know?" demanded Mrs M'Mickie scornfully. "She's a pretty face, that's where it is; and you've allowed your brain to get slightly addled by the sight of her outward

beauty, without paying due consideration to the inside of the cup and of the platter. I should have thought you were too old for that sort of nonsense."

The minister flushed and bit his lip at this discourteous address; he was a mild, tame sort of creature, and being very poor, he found it greatly to his advantage to keep on good terms with his wealthy parishioner (it was as her guest that he was now in London to consult a doctor about his throat, which had lately been troubling him); but still he thought that, as her spiritual adviser, he had a right to be treated with a certain amount of respect, and his spirit, meek though it was, was stirred to rebellion by her tone and manner. He thought of the red-haired, fresh-skinned young woman whom he had once loved, and wished to wed, but whom he had been persuaded by Mrs M'Mickie to give up. His patroness had assured him that Jessie Rose was not at all a fitting help-meet for him, and had declared that he ought to do a great deal better, in a worldly point of view; and at last he had weakly yielded to her; and had refrained from asking Jessie to be his wife.

Since then, the red-haired maiden had come into a fortune of two hundred pounds a-year, and was now the blooming wife of a richer minister than himself, whose house she managed

in a style that made him one of the happiest among men, and which caused the Rev. Alexander (who had not yet had any chance of "doing better" for himself) to heave piteous sighs of regret at his own folly in giving her up. He thought of all this as he listened to Mrs M'Mickie's sharp reprimand for venturing to express his admiration of Mrs Moncrieffe, and his heart swelled with a bitter sense of oppression and injustice. But yet he had not the courage to shake off the yoke that galled him, and only flushed and bit his lip in silence.

"Still," continued Mrs M'Mickie after a pause, "she is a modest-looking young woman, and she seems amenable to reason—though she *did* pay five guineas for her hat. Patsey, just make up a parcel of tracts, and the first time Mr Macdougal passes that way he can leave it at her house. Select those that treat on vanity, and love of dress, and general worldliness; who knows but that they may be a means of grace to her, and help to counteract the pernicious effect of the godless companionship and example of those by whom she is surrounded."

Here Sir Eldred contrived to make his adieux to his aunt and her friends, and as he went downstairs he could still hear Mr Macdougal maintaining that, to his mind,

Mrs Moncrieffe was a fair blossom of great promise.

"Confound the fellow!" he thought, angrily. "What right has a lubber like that to admire *her?*" and then he laughed at his own folly. "A cat may look at a king I suppose?" he muttered, "so why not a clown at a princess? But I wonder what the deuce is the matter with her to-day. Can I have done anything to offend or vex her?"

CHAPTER II.

SIR ELDRED IS PUZZLED, AND HARRY IS ANGRY.

WHAT was the matter with her we know well enough, though to Harry and Sir Eldred her conduct appeared inexplicable. The latter was on intimate terms with the lady to whose garden party she was going, and had hinted, as he handed her to her carriage, that, if she would allow him to accompany her, he would be very welcome at Richmond. But she had appeared not to notice his words, and something in her manner made him feel himself unwelcome; so he turned away from the carriage door feeling rather snubbed, and reentered the house not in the best of tempers. As for Harry, her indignation was unbounded. What did Constance mean by treating Eldred like that? Did she wish to make mischief between him and her (Harry)?

"Oh, you naughty, naughty, naughty girl!" cried Mrs Greville, shaking her finger playfully at Harry. "How *could* you behave so shockingly to that rich old lady? Oh! fie, fie, fie!"

"I wasn't ruder to her than she was to me —or than Constance was to Sir Eldred, just now."

"Ah! poor, dear Eldred! he is the *dearest* creature, but he is not a good *parti*. Constance was right, my dear; it would have looked conspicuous to have taken him to Mrs St John's with us. Never compromise yourself with a poor man."

To this Harry vouchsafed no reply, and until they reached Richmond she maintained an ominous silence. Once in Mrs St John's grounds, she instantly quitted her stepmother's side, nor did she once approach her until it was time to depart.

Captain Clifford was here to-day, and Harry kept him by her side the entire afternoon, and laughed as she saw the vexation with which Constance kept glancing at her from time to time. Surrounded by young men, and with Captain Clifford ever at her side, she contrived to enjoy herself very well, though she doubtless attracted more attention than was desirable for so young a girl. Constance should see, she resolved, that if she were not

allowed to be with Eldred, she could find plenty of other ineligibles to flirt with; and her conduct to-day was wilder and more giddy than usual, and she seemed to take special pains to make herself conspicuous and shock the proprieties.

Poor Constance was in despair. It was all very well when she was alone at home, to tell herself that she would wash her hands of Harry, and leave her to manage her own affairs; but now that she felt the girl was under her charge, she could not help but care how she behaved. She was ready to cry with vexation, and at last got hold of one of Mrs St John's servants, who promised to seek out her coachman and order her carriage for her. It seemed to her that her only course was to carry Harry off bodily, but when the carriage came, Harry declined to depart before the time that had been originally fixed. It was with considerable trepidation that Constance approached the young lady (who was standing conversing in no gentle tones with Captain Clifford and some other young fellows), and informed her that the carriage was waiting to take them home.

"Why, it wants an hour to the time we were to leave," said Harry, drawing out her dainty little watch and consulting it.

"And your watch is half-an-hour fast—

assure you it is," added Captain Clifford, looking familiarly over Miss Moncrieffe's shoulder as he spoke.

"Come, Harry, I am going," said Constance firmly.

"Very well, but *I* am not," returned the girl pertly, being perfectly aware that her step-mother durst not leave her.

"My dear, you must really. I insist," said Constance, still striving to carry things with a high hand.

"How do you intend to take me?" laughed the girl impertinently.

"Come, no tyranny with us, Mrs Moncrieffe," struck in Captain Clifford, not over politely (though he fancied his manner was the perfection of easy playfulness). "It won't wash here, I can tell you."

To this Constance vouchsafed no reply, but turning her back upon the objectionable captain, walked proudly away, followed by his and Harry's laughter.

"Flatter myself we rather sold her ladyship there," laughed Captain Clifford, bending his head yet closer to Harry's, and speaking in a tone of jocular familiarity, which rather disconcerted the young lady.

She was conscious that she and Captain Clifford had been rather rude to her step-mother, and she was inclined to be

vexed with the gallant captain in consequence.

She would not yield openly to Constance's authority, however, and more than an hour and a half elapsed ere she walked coolly up to her step-mother, and informed her that she was ready to go home.

Constance said never a word to her, but rose silently and led the way to the carriage, followed by Mrs Greville, who was complaining piteously of the lateness of the hour, and declaring that she would never have time to dress for the dinner to which she was engaged that evening.

The drive home was a tedious one. Mrs Greville was impatient and fretful; Constance was tired out, and felt that she was beginning with a nervous headache; and Harry was defiant and obstinately silent. As they were driving through Hyde Park, however, she startled both her companions by starting suddenly up and calling out to the coachman to stop. He did so; and then Harry proceeded to shake hands with and embrace two young ladies who had hurried up to the side of the carriage, and whom Constance recognised with some dismay as the Misses Day.

"You dear old thing," cried Carry, kissing the tip of her friend's nose effusively, "what an *age* it is since I have seen you!"

"I didn't know you were in town," replied Harry, while Miss Day turned to greet Mrs Moncrieffe, who was looking on in frigid silence, and merely condescended to touch the tip of Carry's fingers with her own.

"And how is Julia?" cried Netta eagerly.

"How I wish you could come and see us," added Carry.

"*Do*, there's a darling," chimed in Netta; and Harry readily promised to do so, and finally agreed to visit them the following Sunday, this being Friday.

"Who were those young women?" asked Mrs Greville, as the carriage rolled on its way. She was cross at the extra delay, and spoke in a disparaging tone that instantly roused Harry to do battle for her friends.

"They are the best friends I have in the world," she said, vehemently.

"Really!" murmured Mrs Greville, raising her eyebrows deprecatingly. "Rather peculiar style—walking in the park alone, isn't it?"

"They're as good style as *I* am," retorted the girl hotly.

Mrs Greville said nothing, but smiled in an aggravatingly significant manner that roused Harry's anger to boiling pitch. She said nothing further, however, and silence reigned until they had deposited Mrs Greville at her own house.

When they reached home after this they found dinner waiting them, and Moncrieffe fuming at their delay. He insisted on their sitting down to table as soon as ever they had taken off their hats, and chid Constance slightly for her unpunctuality.

"It was my fault," said Harry bluntly. "Constance wanted to come two hours earlier, but I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't!" echoed her father severely. "What do you mean, Harriet?" (he only called her Harriet when he was displeased with her). "Did you dare to refuse to obey your mother?"

"She is *not* my mother!" retorted the girl fiercely. "She only wanted to bring me away because she saw I was enjoying myself—"

"Silence!" said Moncrieffe, in a voice that made both Harry and Constance start involuntarily. "I will suffer no disrespect to be shown to Constance. And Harry, understand me, for the future you will obey her in everything."

And this from her formerly indulgent father! Harry could scarcely credit her ears. She could have found it in her heart to cry with rage and wounded affection, but instead, she marched out of the room, with an air of affected indifference, and whistled loudly as

soon as she was outside the door. What was to be done with such a girl?

Bruce and Constance exchanged a look of mutual despair and vexation, and he remarked, for the first time, how tired and worn his wife was looking.

"How pale you are, Constance," he said, putting his arm kindly round her, and drawing her towards him. "Is your head aching, dear?"

The tears sprang into her eyes at the unwonted tones of kindness, for she was overwrought and nervous.

"It is nothing," she said, wearily. "I am rather tired, that is all—and I am worried about Harry."

"Silly child, she will come to her senses in time, you will see," he replied, soothingly. "But really, my dear, I don't think you look fit to go out this evening."

"Oh, yes; I shall be all right after I have a rest. I think I won't come down to dinner; I will rest till it is time to dress."

"I have a good mind to order you to remain at home to-night. Remember how much depends upon your taking proper care of yourself, my darling."

It was the first time that he had ever called her *darling*, and she laughed a little as she replied,—

"And remember how disappointed Harry would be if I did not take her to Lady B—'s ball. No, I shall rest for an hour, and then I shall be all right, I assure you."

Here Harry re-entered the room, and she and her father descended to an uncomfortable *tête-à-tête* dinner (they being each out of humour with the other), while Constance betook herself to her own room, where her maid brought her some hot soup.

After dinner Bruce came up to see how she was, and found her preparing to begin her toilette. He was to accompany her and Harry that evening, but he had a prejudice against girls going out without some lady to chaperon them, so never thought of taking Harry without Constance.

The ball at Lady B—'s was a very grand affair. The rooms were crowded to suffocation, and, the weather being extremely hot, they soon became heated, like so many furnaces. Constance was weary and exhausted to begin with, and soon her head was aching violently, and she felt scarcely equal to the exertion of answering the various friends who addressed her.

Presently Sir Eldred came in, and made his way straight up to her side; but she received him coldly, and told him frankly that she did not feel up to talking to him.

"What a shame to drag you out when you are so ill!" exclaimed the young man, thinking of Harry.

But Constance fancied his words were a reflection on her husband, and replied, sharply,—

"No one dragged me out, Sir Eldred. My husband wished me to remain at home, but—"

"But you were afraid of Harry," he struck in quietly; and this was so exactly the truth that Constance could find no words with which to contradict him. "I didn't think you were such a moral coward," he continued, in the tone of familiar playfulness which she had hitherto found so pleasant. "The idea of making yourself ill because you dare not disappoint a spoilt girl like that of one ball!"

"A spoilt girl like that!" Then he did *not* care for Harry, or he could not have spoken of her in that tone. For a minute Constance felt a quick throb of relief, then she bit her lip sharply. What did it matter to her whether he loved Harry or not? She looked down in silence, without attempting to reply to his last words; and he stretched out his hand for her fan, intending to fan her, seeing that she looked so pale; but she drew her fan quickly and firmly away, saying coldly,—

"You see how ill I am. All I want is to

be left alone, please. I do not feel as if I could talk to anyone."

Without another word, he rose and left her, thinking of her coldness to him that afternoon at Mrs M'Mickie's, and wondering what it meant. It was so utterly unlike her to be sharp and unkind; yet he could think of nothing he had done to offend her.

And she watched his retreating figure, with growing contrition for her curt manner to him, and felt sorely tempted to call him back, and seek to atone for it by redoubled graciousness; but she pressed her lips tightly together, and refrained.

Instead, she began to think how kind Bruce had been to her that evening, and tried to work herself into a fever of tenderness and gratitude towards him. But the heat and glare and noise around were not conducive to sweet meditation, and soon Constance forgot everything except that her head was aching, and that Harry would insist on remaining for several hours longer.

She got away into a quiet corner of one of the rooms, among a lot of old dowagers whom she did not know, and consequently had not to talk to, and leaning her head against the back of her chair, tried to rest. Slowly the time dragged by, and presently she was startled to hear a voice addressing her,—

"Let me take you down to get some supper, Mrs Moncrieffe."

She looked round, and saw Sir Eldred and Harry standing beside her. He had apparently forgiven her for her late ungraciousness (which he probably laid to the score of her headache), for he was smiling kindly at her, and in his eyes there was a look of kindly concern for her. She turned her eyes quickly away from his, however, and declined his offer less coldly than before, but none the less firmly. She did not want any supper, she said; and when he showed signs of sitting down beside her, she rose, and walked up to an old lady at the other end of the room, and immediately entered into conversation with her.

"What have I done to offend your stepmother?" asked Sir Eldred, flushing slightly, but trying to speak lightly.

"Goodness knows!" responded Harry, with a shrug. "Perhaps you see now that she is not *quite* such an angel as you supposed."

But he would admit nothing of the kind, and led Harry back to the dancing-room in silence, and there delivered her over to her next partner, Captain Clifford. A few minutes later Harry saw him bid his hostess goodnight, and leave the room, and her cheeks burnt with anger, for Eldred was still en-

gaged to her for several dances, and she fancied, and rightly, that it was Constance's treatment that had driven him away.

"Yet why should he mind her?" she thought, indignantly, to herself. "If he really cared for me he would not allow her to make mischief between us."

All this evening Harry had behaved with unwonted decorum, owing to Sir Eldred's presence. She had only given Captain Clifford two dances, and had not flirted remarkably with anyone. But now, in her anger, she took her usual method of revenging herself, and allowed Captain Clifford to write his name down all the rest of her programme. But before many dances were over, her father came and informed her that they must go home, as Constance was not well enough to remain longer; and as the girl dared not disobey *him*, she betook herself to the cloak-room in sulky silence.

"Well, Harry, have you had a pleasant evening?" asked Constance, as they were enveloping themselves in their wraps.

"I should have had if it hadn't been for *you!*" replied the girl bluntly.

"I am sorry I had to bring you away so early," replied Constance wearily; "but my head—"

"Oh yes—that is a very nice excuse,"

interrupted Harry, with a grim laugh. "I believe you were afraid of Eldred's coming back."

As Constance attempted no reply, the discussion dropped here, and Harry concluded that her step-mother was at a loss how to defend her infamous conduct, and for that reason had taken refuge in silence.

CHAPTER III.

AN ACCUSATION.

NEXT morning found Constance so unwell, that she had to spend the rest of the day in bed. Harry, who was conscious of having been unkind in laughing at her headache last night, felt some twinges of conscience, and for the first time it occurred to her that she had been selfish in dragging her step-mother to Lady B—'s ball. She was not a bad-hearted girl, and when, towards evening, Constance came down-stairs, looking white and worn, she asked her rather awkwardly how she was, and actually rose to place a chair for her.

Perhaps it was because Constance had felt ill that she had been so strange in her manner to Eldred yesterday, the girl thought, and she grew considerably ashamed of her rude

words in the cloak-room last night, as she reflected thus.

"Thank you, dear," said Constance, sinking into the proffered seat, and feeling considerably surprised by her step-daughter's unusual courtesy. "I feel much better now; but I am afraid you will have to give up your party to-night, unless you can persuade your father to take you."

"Oh, he won't do that," replied Harry rather disconsolately.

"I am so sorry to disappoint you; but you see I can't help it."

"Oh, of course you can't," responded the girl heartily. "I don't mind staying at home one night. I—I am sorry you went out last night; I am afraid it made you worse."

"It was my own fault; your father did not wish me to go, but I didn't like to disappoint you."

It occurred to Harry that her step-mother had behaved very unselfishly, and returned good for evil in a way hardly to have been expected. She felt that she ought to say something, but hardly knew how to do so, so got up and left the room abruptly.

All the rest of that evening she continued friendly and good-natured to Constance, who actually began to fancy that she had conquered her step-daughter's prejudices at last.

Next day being Sunday, Constance herself reminded Harry of her engagement to visit the Days, and told her to take her maid with her as escort. She also told her she might ask Carry and Netta to luncheon next day. This she did, thinking it well to try and confirm Harry in her present good feeling towards herself; and Harry was certainly much mollified, especially by the permission to invite the Days to the house, and set off in high spirits, and feeling almost disposed to like her step-mother.

She went in time to lunch with the Days, and found them waiting for her with open arms. They came rushing out into the passage to receive her, and after much kissing and squeezing, led her laughingly into their sitting-room (they were in lodgings), where they told her that a surprise awaited her.

And there, sure enough, was Edgar Day standing in front of her, with a look of flattering expectancy on his face. Both his sisters burst into a delighted giggle as he and Harry shook hands, as though the sight had something peculiar in it.

Harry found herself blushing, and looking conscious, though in truth she was very far indeed from feeling sentimentally disposed towards Mr Day. As she afterwards expressed it to Julia, she and Edgar were taken and

poked at each other, and of course they both looked conscious and silly. At the time Harry was not quite certain whether she resented it or not, but she laughed, and shook Edgar's hand as unconcernedly as she could.

"So we meet at last," he said, sentimentally.

"Wasn't it funny your meeting each other in Paris?" gushed Netta, with a fresh cascade of laughter.

"You can't tell how delighted I was when Edgar wrote me word that he had met you. I won't say all he said about you, or—"

"Carry, don't!" interposed the brother, looking embarrassed.

"Well, I will spare your blushes, and Harry's," laughed Carry. "And now, you old darling, come and take your hat off in my room."

She and Netta danced round Harry as she left the room; and danced round her as she re-entered it. They made her tell them all about herself, her gaieties, and her admirers; and especially how she had lately been getting on with her step-mother.

Harry was disposed to speak more kindly of the latter than she had hitherto done, and Carry, seeing this, hastened to use all the arguments she could to re-confirm the girl in her old prejudices.

This she did without any special motive. She certainly had a hazy notion that, when Mrs Moncrieffe gained any influence over Harry, the first use she would make of it would be to put a stop to the friendship between her and themselves (the Days); but she spoke as she did more from an innate love of mischief than with any definite object. She reminded Harry of the way that her step-mother had played eavesdropper on the first day of her arrival at Brighton, and repeated that she was not to be trusted, however sweet she might seem. She called up innumerable little grievances, which Harry and Julia had complained of in their letters; and finally declared that it was a piece of cruel tyranny on Mrs Moncrieffe's part not to have let poor Julia accompany her sister to-day.

"Julia was in disgrace with mademoiselle, that's why she wasn't allowed to come," said Harry.

"Stuff and rubbish, my dear," said Carry contemptuously; "depend upon it, your step-mother told her not to let Julia come. I know she hates me like poison, since she heard what I said of her to you at Brighton."

And gradually as Harry listened, her old doubts and suspicions returned, though, perhaps, unknown to herself, they were somewhat shaken.

Edgar Day was particularly attentive to Harry all that afternoon, and she accepted his attentions, and flirted with him, much as she did with every man whom she met. But she never thought of comparing him with Sir Eldred—and indeed she did not think Mr Day quite so charming as she had done in Paris; perhaps, because, since then, she had met Sir Eldred.

After luncheon, they all went out for a walk in the park, and, as far as they could, all walked abreast—Mr Day and Harry in the centre, and a sister on either side. Harry asked them all to lunch next day, but unfortunately they had some friends coming to them, so could not accept the invitation. Harry was sorely vexed at this, and after a minute's reflection asked them to dine instead, as no one was to be with them but Mrs M'Mickie and party, and Mrs Greville, who had invited herself.

"Do come," she cried; "it is an awfully stupid affair, I know, but your being there will make it so *much* jollier for me."

"Well, we shall certainly come then," said Carry, "and make love to the rich aunt," she added, laughing.

They walked home with Harry, and as they neared her door they met Sir Eldred coming away. He stopped to speak, when he saw

that Harry expected him to do so, and informed her that he had just been refused admittance, as Mrs Moncrieffe was not well enough to receive visitors.

"Oh, but come in with *me*," urged Harry. "We needn't bother Constance, you know."

But Sir Eldred was firm, and so also were the Days, who had sufficient taste to decline Harry's invitation to enter the house. She went in alone therefore, and mounted to the drawing-room, where she found her father and Constance, the latter of whom was not looking so ill as Sir Eldred's report seemed to imply.

As Harry entered, she was telling her husband, who had only been in a few minutes, of a visit she had had that afternoon from her cousin, Josh de Vere, Sir Charles's only son. He had only lately returned from the continent, and Constance said she had asked him to dine with them the following evening.

"It will just make the number at table equal," she added.

"I thought we were to ask Eldred to make up the eighth," said Moncrieffe.

"Oh, he is sure to be engaged."

"Not at all sure; for many of his friends don't know he is in town."

"He is always here; he will get tired of us," she said, with a nervous laugh.

"He is always glad to come here, you know,"

replied Moncrieffe, with emphasis. "However, I am glad you have asked your cousin," he added, quickly, bethinking him that his wife might fancy he objected to having many of her relations about the house. "Only, as Eldred leaves town on Tuesday, I should have liked to have him here once again."

"He goes on Tuesday?" asked Constance, and Harry fancied she detected an accent of relief in her voice.

"Yes. I met him this morning, and he told me he was obliged to go down to Gwendale on business. Suppose we have him and Julia down to make the tenth?"

"We couldn't possibly have Julia without mademoiselle," said Constance; and Bruce was forced to drop the discussion.

"Well, Harry, and how did you enjoy yourself?" asked Constance, turning to the girl, who had been standing by, with lowering brows, during the above discussion.

"Oh, yes, very much," she replied, sullenly.

"And did you ask the Misses Day to lunch?" asked Constance, wondering at the change that had come over the girl's manner since the morning.

"They couldn't come to lunch, so I asked them and their brother to dinner."

"To dinner to-morrow, and their brother too?" repeated Constance blankly.

"How dare you ask people to dinner without Constance's permission?" struck in Moncrieffe sharply. "The Days are not at all the sort of people Mrs M'Mickie will like to meet. Besides, she especially said she would only come to us if there was no party."

"I told Harry she might ask her friends to lunch to-morrow," said Constance soothingly. "I suppose she forgot we were not alone in the evening."

"No, I didn't," said Harry; "but I didn't see any harm in asking the Days. However, now you might as well ask Eldred, to make the table equal."

"Yes, we may as well do that," assented Moncrieffe. "But remember, Harry, that you do not behave like this again."

Constance seated herself at the writing-table, and penned a friendly note to Sir Eldred, asking him to spend his last evening in town with them, if he had nothing better to do. She was relieved to think that he was leaving town so soon, and felt that she could afford to be civil to him.

Presently her husband quitted the room, and she was left alone with Harry. The latter waited till she had finished her note, and despatched it by a footman, and then she began, sharply,—

"If you were too ill to see Eldred this

afternoon, how was it you admitted your cousin?"

Constance started at the abrupt address, and replied, coldly,—

"Because he *was* my cousin. I had not seen him for a long time. But one visitor was as much as I could stand."

"Oh, you don't look so ill as all that comes to," laughed Harry. "You could have received Eldred quite well if you had chosen."

"But I did not choose," replied Constance, losing her temper, and speaking with injudicious coldness.

"And I know quite well why you did not," cried Harry, losing all self-control at this last open avowal. "I know why you were so rude to him yesterday, and why you didn't want him asked here to-morrow. You want to offend him, and make mischief between him and me; and that old beast, Mrs Greville, has put it into your head, by saying that he isn't a good *parti*—bah! how I hate the vile world!"

"Harry, you are talking nonsense," said Constance, with some indignation, for it provoked her beyond endurance that the girl should so calmly take it for granted that Sir Eldred came to the house solely for *her* sake. "I am certain Sir Eldred never dreamt of you in *that* way. You are only deceiving

yourself, and preparing mortification and disappointment for yourself when you indulge in such fancies."

For a minute Harry was too stunned and surprised by this declaration to utter a word; then her indignation burst forth fiercely, and she exclaimed, vehemently,—

"You lie, and you know you do!"

Then she stopped abruptly, remembering that, after all, she had no positive right to speak like this, and a burning blush of shame and anger spread over her face and throat. Constance was sorry for her, and turning away her head, pretended not to see her change of colour. She had done her duty and warned her. If she still chose to be blind and deceive herself, it would be her own fault.

Presently Harry spoke again, and this time her voice was more subdued, but had a hard, grating sound, very unusual in it.

"In that case, why do you try to keep Eldred at arm's-length. You must have some motive. What is it?"

"You are not in a fit state to argue the subject, Harry," said Constance, turning away; but Harry saw her change colour, and fancied that there was a slight nervousness in her voice.

"Oh! I see how it is," she cried, con-

temptuously. "You can't defend yourself, so say I'm not fit to argue with. Well, I sha'n't argue any more then," and so saying she flounced out of the room, and shut the door after her with a bang that made Constance start and grow pale with nervousness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DINNER PARTY.

WHEN Sir Eldred arrived to dinner the following evening, Mrs Moncrieffe received him much in her usual manner, and he supposed that on Friday she had merely been rendered a little irritable by her headache. She was still looking far from well, and he fancied that at times there was something strained and nervous in her manner. Mrs M'Mickie had arrived about twenty minutes before dinner time, and was looking sourer and sourer at each fresh arrival.

"If I had known it was to be such a large party—and women with bare necks" (this applied to Harry, who was going to a couple of balls after dinner, and was quite *décolletée*), "I should not have come," she remarked, grimly, to Miss Trotter, who blushed guiltily,

conscious that she had been secretly admiring the evening toilettes of the other ladies.

Julia—sweet little Julia—had read up all the tracts which Mr Macdougal had left at the house, and was seated in a pretty attitude beside Mrs M'Mickie, whose snubs and sharp speeches she endured with admirable patience. She cast wistful glances now and then towards the Days; but though Edgar tried to draw her into conversation, she resisted gallantly, and stuck to her post beside her aunt.

At dinner, Constance had to let Harry sit beside Sir Eldred, otherwise she knew that both Harry and her father would be extremely annoyed. On Harry's other hand sat Netta Day, and beyond her Josh de Vere, a fat, fair young man of two-and-twenty, who was rather empty-headed, and whose ruling passion was love of his dinner. Sir Eldred had handed his hostess down, but she talked principally to little Miss Trotter who sat on her other hand, and whom she completely fascinated. Harry thought she did this because she was frightened to stand openly between her and Eldred, after the scene between them yesterday in the drawing-room, and did not accredit her with any generous motives. And in this she was right, for, could she have helped it, Constance would never have suffered Sir Eldred and Harry to exchange a word again. She

watched them covertly now, and had to confess that they seemed to get on together very well. But she saw too, that all the time the young baronet was conversing with her step-daughter, he was watching herself, and noting her every look and movement; and the discovery soothed her, unconsciously to herself. Edgar Day was seated beside Mrs Greville, with whom he was flirting quietly; but from time to time he cast a look at Harry, which told her plainly that he would rather be beside her, and she laughed gaily and defiantly back, but was glad he could not turn Eldred out of his place by her side.

"I have such scrumptious news for you, Harry," said Miss Netta, finding that the gallant Josh was too absorbed in his dinner to attend to her at that minute. "You know poor dear Edgar didn't dare to follow you to Rome this winter because your step-mother snubbed him so. But he has taken a cottage for us this summer at Dunkellie, so we shall be quite near you. Isn't it jolly?"

"Awfully," Harry was responding, when Mrs M'Mickie's voice struck across the table.

"Mrs Greville," she said, shrilly, addressing her *vis-à-vis*, "would it be convenient to you to return me that money which I paid for your entrance at the Royal Academy the other day?"

"What money?" lisped the little lady, in affected surprise, "Ah, yes, of course," she added, quickly. "I remember now; but I do not carry my purse about to dinners."

"You seem in the habit of forgetting your purse," remarked the other drily.

"Really, Mrs M'Mickie—" stammered Mrs Greville, growing very red.

"And you've never paid me that five shillings I lent you on Saturday for the leeches," struck in Mr Josh, who, having come to the end of one course, was able to attend to the conversation around him.

"Leeches!" echoed Mrs Greville, looking aghast. "Leeches!"

"Yes; don't you remember, Aunt Fanny? I met you in Bond Street on Saturday morning, and you went into a shop where there were bottles and hair and that sort of thing in the window, you know, but you wouldn't let me go in with you."

"Oh, I'll pay you and Mrs M'Mickie my debts to-morrow without fail," cried Mrs Greville, laughing nervously, and darting a somewhat vicious look at her nephew.

He, however, continued with the utmost innocence,—"You said you'd forgotten your purse—"

"As usual," struck in Mrs M'Mickie, in a stage aside.

"And asked me to lend you five shillings. You came out with a little round box in your hand, and I asked if it was leeches, and you said 'Yes, yes.'"

Everyone tried not to smile, and Mrs Greville grew scarlet.

"What put such a ridiculous idea into your head?" she began, sharply.

"Oh, I'd been having leeches on my throat, and I thought perhaps you had to have some too," said Josh simply, "I say, what are all you people laughing at?" he added, plaintively. "That's always the way whenever I say anything, everyone laughs. And they won't tell me why."

Here the arrival of a fresh course reduced the fat young man to silence; and Mrs Greville hastened to assure Mr Day that she had only bought a little cold cream on Saturday; and he looked as though he believed her implicitly.

"I don't think much of Constance's cousin," whispered Harry to Sir Eldred. "Don't you see a strong family likeness between him and Constance?"

"I can't say I do," he replied, stiffly. "Beyond the fact of their both being fair, I should say they were utterly unlike each other."

"He isn't half as clever as she is," said

Harry viciously. "Listen! he's beginning again."

"Aunt Fanny," said Josh's plaintive voice, "where did you apply the leeches?"

"They were *not* leeches, Josh—"

"Oh yes, you said they were, you know. Mine would not stick on. They kept slipping away, and one got up the fellow's arm—the fellow who was putting them on, you know. Once," added Josh meditatively, "I knew of a fellow who had to have one put on his nose, but it escaped, and got *up* his nose, and a few days after it came out of his mouth as he was eating his breakfast. He was in an awful state; they thought he would go mad, you know. Aunt Fanny, where did you apply *your* leeches?"

"My dear Josh, how often am I to tell you that it was cold cream I bought, *not* leeches," cried Mrs Greville, now on the verge of tears.

It apparently dawned upon Mr de Vere that he had vexed his aunt in some way, for he stared at her gravely for several minutes, and then turning to Miss Day, began confiding to her that he was to stand for some small town, at an election which was to take place shortly, in Blankshire. He was in no wise discouraged to find that she was quite a stranger to Scotland; but persisted in talking

to her (between the courses), as if she had known Blankshire intimately.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, he sat by the side of Harry, for whom he had conceived a profound admiration, and discoursed on the same subject to her; while she made unmerciful fun of him, and sent the Days into fits of laughter by the absurd way in which she drew him on to talk. Constance was at the other end of the room beside her chief guest, Mrs M'Mickie; and Sir Eldred sat beside her, helping her in the difficult task of amusing his aunt, and taking much of the burden of talking off her shoulders. Harry was annoyed by his desertion of herself, and revenged herself by encouraging Mr Josh and Edgar Day. The latter, however, divided his attentions pretty equally between her and Julia, who, he fancied, was Mrs M'Mickie's favourite niece, and therefore better worth cultivating. When he took his leave, however, he contrived to leave on each sister's mind the impression that *she* was the true object of his admiration.

Julia thought of him a good deal as she went to bed that night; but Harry forgot him almost as soon as he was out of sight. All her thoughts were occupied by the remembrance of the kind way in which Sir Eldred had pressed her hand at parting, and the way

in which he had informed her that she would soon see him again. He had said "you," meaning the whole party; but Harry was pleased to take his speech to herself—and of course, taken in that sense, it could only mean one thing.

CHAPTER V.

RASH WORDS.

IT was only a few days after this that Moncrieffe one morning sought his wife in her boudoir, where she was writing notes, with an open letter in his hand, and a somewhat anxious expression on his face.

"My dear," he began, "can you attend to me for a few minutes?"

Constance laid down her pen and leant back in her chair, and her husband proceeded,—

"I have just had a letter from Emily Fortescue, saying that her mother is very ill of pleurisy, and hardly expected to recover. She has been asking for the girls, so of course we must go to her at once, poor old lady."

"Of course," acquiesced Constance readily. "I suppose this will put a stop to Adelaide's

marriage?" she added, for the youngest Miss Fortescue was to have been married about the middle of the month, and the Moncrieffes were all to have gone to Brighton to attend the ceremony.

"Yes, so Emily says."

"I suppose you want to go as soon as possible? Oh, dear! what a lot of notes I shall have to write! I wonder if Harry would help me with them?"

"My dear," said Moncrieffe hesitatingly, "I am afraid you won't like being at Brighton. It will be gloomy and depressing for you in a sick house, and—"

"Oh! this is not a time to consider me," said Constance, smiling, and pleased that he should think of her, all the same. "If Mrs Fortescue is in danger, and wants her grand-daughters, of course they must go to her."

"Of course; but it is not at all necessary for you to go too."

"Then you think of remaining here with me?"

"I think I ought to go with the girls; it would seem unkind if I did not. But how would you like to go to Scotland and wait for us there? I have been afraid for some time, dear, that London was too hot and trying for you, and to tell the truth, I am

very glad to get you away from it so speedily—"

"But I shouldn't like to go down to Moncrieffe all by myself the first time," interrupted Constance, blankly. "If you want to get rid of me for a little, let me go to my mother. *She* will be glad to have me with her."

Constance spoke with a little tinge of bitterness, yet her heart beat faster at the prospect of escaping to her mother's home again.

"Constance, would you dislike very much to go north with Mrs M'Mickie?" asked Moncrieffe, coming behind her, and laying his hands on her two shoulders.

But she shook them off as though they stung her, and turned passionately upon him.

"Dislike it? of course I should *hate* it! Do you wish me to go with that awful old woman, really Bruce?"

"No, no, certainly not; if you dislike it so much," he replied, turning away, with a shade of disappointment on his face. "I hardly expected you would do it. The old lady has taken a great fancy to you, as you know; and has been telling me that it was very bad for you to remain longer in London—and there I quite agree

with her. She leaves for Scotland the day after to-morrow, and yesterday she asked me to let you go down to Drum with her. She has set her heart upon taking you, but of course you must do as you like yourself, my dear."

For several minutes Constance sat twisting her pen round and round in her fingers, while a host of contending thoughts and emotions passed through her. It would be terrible to go to Blankshire for the first time without her husband; and still more dreadful to go with Mrs M'Mickie and her party. Yet would she be doing her duty by Bruce if she refused to comply with his request? He had married her for the sake of his girls, and given her wealth and everything that wealth could buy, on condition that she acted a mother's part to his daughters; and would she be doing so if she mortally offended a rich old lady, who had it in her power to leave them twelve thousand a-year? Yet why should she punish herself to forward the interests of two girls who had never treated her as anything but an enemy? No, she would not do it! Bruce was asking too much of her.

"Would Mrs M'Mickie be very much offended if I declined her offer?" she asked, at length, in a more subdued voice.

"I am afraid she would. I won't conceal from you, Constance, that this is a matter of more importance than you can tell. Mrs M'Mickie will brook no opposition, and she has set her heart on taking you with her. Money is not a thing to be despised, Constance, whatever romantic novelists may write to the contrary. When I believed that Harry and Julia would be my sole heiresses, I took no pains to conciliate their mother's aunt; and consequently she is not very amiably disposed towards them. But now, dear, that there is a chance of their having a brother to inherit Moncrieffe, it seems our duty to try and make friends with their aunt; and I was in hopes you might help to conciliate her, as she likes you. But money is not everything, and I do not wish you to do anything that is really unpleasant to you."

"Don't you?" she asked, with a dry laugh. "It is very good of you to consider my feelings. But what are *they* in comparison to your girls' fortunes? Oh, no," she went on quickly, as he seemed about to speak, "I know quite well that I am of no importance compared to your daughters. I am their *duenna*, their finishing governess! To you, I am the mistress of your house, and nothing more. Why didn't you hire a lady companion

for them? They could have changed *her* if they had not liked her. It would have been better than marrying a poor girl to make a bond slave of her."

"I must confess myself at a loss to understand your meaning, Constance," said Moncrieffe haughtily. "I was in hopes that I had made you tolerably happy since your marriage."

"Would *you* be happy in my place?" she asked, passionately.

"I certainly fancy I should. Of course you have some worries—we all have. But Harry behaves much better than she used to; and I am sure Julia has never given you much cause of complaint. For myself, I have done my best to make you happy—if I have failed, I can only express my deep regret."

His cold tones fell like ice-bolts on the fierce fire of her indignation, and chilled her with a deathly chill, only to make her burn more hotly next minute.

"Yes!" she said, with a little, mirthless laugh, "you have given me fine houses, and horses, and carriages, and clothes—everything but love! But I have no right to expect everything, of course. Only as money has failed to make me content, it is natural that I should not set such a high value upon it as you and Mrs M'Mickie do, isn't it? Besides"

(with a rapid increase of passion) "is it natural that I should care to sacrifice myself for two girls who hate me? No, it is unreasonable to expect it, and I will not do it!"

"You will please yourself," replied her husband frigidly. "Since you are so unhappy here, I suppose you had better rejoin your mother for awhile."

With these words he walked out of the room, leaving Constance with flushed cheeks, and dry, glittering eyes, into which no tears would come.

As soon as she was alone, she rose, and began to pace the room, with her hands clasped tightly over her beating heart. How cold! how hard! how *cruel* he had been! Instead of being overwhelmed with confusion, as she had expected, when she brought her charges against him, he had assumed that formal offended tone, which only increased her passion, while it made her feel how impotent it was. Not one word of kindness or contrition had he uttered—not one.

When she had accused him of not loving her, he had not attempted to deny the charge. Not for a minute had his face softened from its haughty displeasure. He had looked *offended;* and yet all she had said had been true. He had taken her abroad, not so much on a wedding tour, as on an educational jour-

ney for his girls. He had brought her to hot, breathless London, and made her fag herself to death at parties, balls and, *fêtes* for Harry's sake; and now that he no longer needed her services for himself or his girls, he expected her quietly to withdraw from the family, and martyrise herself by going as a kind of state prisoner to Mrs M'Mickie; in order, forsooth, to forward the interests of his beloved girls! and yet he was angry with her for complaining! Oh, it was hard, bitterly hard! and at that minute Constance felt that she almost hated her husband.

Why was it that Eldred's face would rise before her, with that look of tender concern in its handsome blue eyes? The tears started into her own as she thought of it; and involuntarily she contrasted it with Bruce's cold, haughty one.

Frightened and confused, she threw herself into a low chair, and burying her face in her hands, sought to shut out the images of her own fancy. But in vain; the two heads kept dancing before her eyes till they dizzied her, and made her brain feel heavy and confused.

All her passion had died away, for she was too shocked and alarmed by her own thoughts to feel angry any longer. Sitting upright, she pushed back her hair from her heated forehead, and tried to pull herself mentally together.

What had she done? what had she said? what was she now thinking? She had deeply offended her husband, that was certain; and he had advised her to rejoin her mother, since she was not happy with him. Surely she had been foolish to tell him that she had not been happy with him. It might be true, but what was the use of telling him? And after all, she reflected wearily, he had never been openly unkind to her. He was better than many husbands, and complaints would not improve him—rather the contrary most likely. Not that she excused him; but she saw the folly of her own conduct. Yet she still felt that nothing could induce her to go to Scotland with Mrs M'Mickie.

Sitting there, with her face buried in her hands, she did not hear a tap at the door, or Julia's entrance, until the girl's voice close behind her made her look up with a start. Julia had come to ask her some question respecting the preparations for departure; but startled and irritated, she told the girl rather sharply not to bother her just then, adding that she would attend to her presently. Julia left the room submissively, but meeting her father on the stairs, she assumed a plaintive, injured look, and inquired what was the matter with Constance.

"I went to speak to her just now," she ex-

plained, "and she spoke *so* crossly, and told me not to bother her."

"She isn't often cross to you," said the father; but his words sounded as much like an interrogation as an assertion, and Julia replied, promptly,—

"Oh, you know *nothing* about her. She can be as cross as cross when she likes; but she looks so sweet when you or anyone else is there."

Moncrieffe went downstairs pondering on what the girl had said, and wondering if there were much truth in it. Certainly Constance had shown herself both cross and unreasonable to him just now. He could not see anything very dreadful in going to Mrs M'Mickie's for a week or so, and failed utterly to understand his wife's horror of the proposed visit. To him her objections seemed selfish and unreasonable —though of course she might not care for staying at Drum very much. Yet surely she might have endured a little dullness for a short while, after all her London dissipation! And he was also deeply shocked and wounded by her assertion that she had never been happy with him. Was it his fault? Had he failed in kindness to her? He knew he had not; but he was aware also that he had never lavished much outward affection upon her, though he had always been kind and careful of her. It was true that he had married her

for the girls' sakes, and the consciousness of this made him all the more angry when she threw the reproach in his teeth. Then there were the girls; but he did not know one half of the disagreements between them and their step-mother, and believed that Constance and Julia were good friends, and that Harry and the former got on much better than they used to. It was natural therefore that he should think Constance unjust; and that had been a nasty thing she had said about his marrying her as a sort of finishing governess to his girls! It was an ungenerous thing of her to say, and he could not forgive it.

When he met his wife at luncheon, however, he behaved to her as though nothing were amiss. He might be somewhat graver, and more silent than usual, but that was all; and when he addressed Constance, there was no displeasure in his tone. But she knew that he was deeply vexed with her for all that, and felt contrite, and angry, and rebellious, and bitterly unhappy all in one. Moncrieffe spoke at luncheon as if it were a settled thing that Constance was to go to her mother; and she suffered him to do so without contradiction. He and the girls were to start directly after dinner, which was unusually early to-night. All the afternoon he was out, and did not come home till half-an-hour before dinner,

when he retired to his study to read some letters. He had not been here long, when a tap came to the door, and Constance entered slowly, and coming up to the empty hearth in front of which he was sitting, began playing nervously with a cigar-case on the mantelpiece.

"I want to speak to you, Bruce," she began, quickly, "if you are not too busy."

"Certainly," he replied, courteously, laying his letter on the table beside him, and pushing forward a chair with the other hand. "Won't you sit down?"

She sank mechanically on to the seat, and, clasping her hands tightly on her lap, proceeded, rapidly,—

"I—I wanted to tell you, Bruce, that I am sorry I spoke as I did this morning. I did not like the idea of going to Scotland without you for the first time; but—if you like, I will go with Mrs M'Mickie."

He allowed her to finish, keeping his eyes carefully turned away, to enable her to recover her calmness. When she came to a dead stop, he replied, quietly, still without looking up,—

"Thank you, my dear; but there is no necessity for you to do so, since you dislike the place so much. When I suggested it, I had no idea it would be so disagreeable to you, or I should have said nothing about it."

"I do not dislike it so—so very much," she replied, faintly, feeling her fever of contrition and self-sacrifice quenched by his matter-of-fact tone; "and I wish to go. You were right—it is my duty to do the best I can for the girls, and I am quite ready to go with Mrs M'Mickie, if you will tell her so."

"No, my dear; I do not choose you to sacrifice yourself. I had no idea that a visit to Mrs M'Mickie would be so dreadful to you; but, since you dislike it, let there be an end to the subject."

She knew not what to respond, and sat there playing nervously with her watch-guard, while he leisurely pared his already perfect nails with his penknife. She had intended to tell him that she had not meant half she had said that morning, and to beg him to be friends with her again; but his manner made her feel this impossible. Had she really loved him, and been craving for his affection and pardon, she might have put her arms round his neck and kissed away his coldness; but she was far too much in awe of him to venture on such a familiarity, and just now her heart was feeling bitter and sore towards him, for all her outward submission.

"I suppose you would rather go to your mother than accompany us to Brighton?" he inquired, after a pause.

"Yes, I think so," she replied, rather indistinctly.

"It will be very depressing and trying for you at Brighton. Your mother will be pleased to see you again. I think you said she was going north about the end of the month, so you can accompany her."

Another faint "Yes," from Constance, and then the conversation seemed to have come to an end. She sat clasping her hands tightly together for a minute or two, with a choking feeling in her throat; then she rose to go in silence, the ball in her throat still preventing her from speaking.

"Oh, by the way," said Moncrieffe suddenly, "I was going to give you some money for your journey, etc. I may as well give it to you now, if you do not mind waiting a minute."

He rose as he spoke, and going over to his writing-table, took a roll of notes and gold out of a drawer, and handed them to his wife. She coloured painfully as she took the money, for it seemed to set forth so vividly the immense obligation she was under to him. She had been a poor, insignificant girl, working for her living; and he had raised her to wealth and importance! What right had she to find fault with him for not treating her precisely as she liked?

She had been bought with a price, and so long as he did not actively ill-treat her, she had no right to complain. She took the money, feeling almost angry with her husband for his generosity (for she saw that the sum he handed her must be a large one, though she could not count it), and he opened the door for her, as if she had been a princess.

"My *bond slave!*" he muttered, savagely, to himself, as soon as she was gone. "She shall never call herself *that* again."

CHAPTER VI.

SIR ELDRED AS CONSOLER.

IT was all over! Bruce and the girls were gone, and Constance sat alone in the dim, summer twilight, feeling cold, and desolate, and forlorn. Bruce had parted from her kindly, but rather coldly, and she knew that he was very much disturbed by the angry note which had arrived half-an-hour before his departure from Mrs M'Mickie. Somehow Constance felt that all chance of real friendship between herself and her husband had been put an end to that day. It was all over between them; henceforth there could never be anything save a hollow, outward truce between them. Just now she was too weary and depressed to feel angry with him, and was only conscious of a feeling of intense loneliness; but her feelings were too wounded to forgive him easily,

though just at present they were numbed and passive.

Her husband said she was to go home to her mother; but somehow she was not as delighted with the prospect as she ought to have been. They were all so happy at home, and would expect her to look as cheerful as themselves. She would go among them as a kill joy—and she shrank too, with sensitive pride, from letting them see that she was unhappy. So why should she not go with Mrs M'Mickie? She did not feel as if she would mind anything, in her present mood; and thought she would as soon go to Scotland as to Clinchester. Bruce wished her to go, and it was important that she should do so.

When he heard that she had really done as he wished, perhaps he would be less vexed with her. Not that she felt penitent, or was anxious in the remotest degree to win his affection *now;* but it is *so* disagreeable to be on bad terms with those about us; and Constance had a special, nervous horror of dissension and strife. If she went to her mother's, Bruce would consider that she had failed in her duty to the girls, and had injured their prospects; and would always be angry with her in his heart. If, on the contrary, she went to Drum, he would think everything was right, and as he wished; and

when they met again, after several weeks' separation, would probably have forgotten that they had ever quarrelled.

She rose slowly and went over to her writing-table, and wrote a note to Mrs M'Mickie, saying that she had changed her mind, and would like to accompany her north, if she (Mrs M'Mickie) would permit her to do so. She rang the bell and ordered the footman to take it at once, and to await an answer; and then she went back once more to her sofa, and sat quite still, with her hands crossed idly on her lap, while the twilight gradually faded, and darkness gathered in the pretty boudoir. How long she sat like this she did not know; but at length she was roused by a tap at the door, and on her giving permission to enter, it opened to admit some one, though the darkness prevented her recognising who it was.

"Anyone here?" asked a well-known voice through the gloom.

"Eldred!" she cried, starting up, and flushing with delight.

"What, all in darkness?" he said, taking her hands in both his own, and holding them tight for a minute. "You are evidently desirous that all your household should break their necks," he added, with an assumption of his old manner. "With your kind per-

mission, lady, I will light the candles. I do not desire to appear to-morrow with a black eye or a broken leg."

While he was thus speaking, he had produced a dainty box of wax matches from his pocket, and lit the candles on the mantelpiece. The light was not very brilliant, but it sufficed to show him that Constance was looking pale and unhappy, and he muttered an inward malediction upon his cousin Bruce and his daughters.

"How is it that you are here?" asked Constance, who had not yet recovered from her surprise.

"My business in Wales is over, *voilà tout.* You didn't suppose I meant to stay away for ever, did you?" he asked, seating himself beside her. "I called here to-night, as I happened to be passing, to see if it was possible to gain admission, though I quite expected to find you and Harry out at your nocturnal dissipations. But the servant told me that Bruce and the girls were off to Brighton, and that you were alone here. An unconscionable hour for a visit, I am guiltily aware; but I could not resist running upstairs to ask what had happened."

"Old Mrs Fortescue is ill with pleurisy, and Bruce has taken her grand-daughters to her."

"Leaving you alone?"

"Yes," replied Constance drearily. "Bruce didn't think—he was afraid it would be dull for me at Brighton," she proceeded, apathetically. "And I daresay he was right—the Fortescues would have found me dreadfully in their way."

"And you are going to remain in town all by yourself?"

"Oh, no; I am going north with Mrs M'Mickie the day after to-morrow."

"Going north with Mrs M'Mickie!" he echoed in astonishment.

"Yes! she makes a point of it. Unfortunately for me she has taken a fancy to me" (with a short laugh), "and she wants to have me with her."

"But you do not know what you are undertaking," cried the young man energetically,—any of his friends who had seen him thus exerting himself would have been considerably surprised. "I have had to stay with her once or twice, and I assure you I would far rather go to prison for a month, than to her house for a single week."

Constance listened to this with a sinking heart, but made no reply, and Sir Eldred continued, with a touch of resentment in his voice,—

"I suppose it is Bruce who wishes you to go to the old woman?"

"Yes—at least—at least—"

"Why don't you go to your mother?" he suggested, suddenly.

"Bruce said I was to do so, but—"

"But he wished you to go to Scotland all the same?" he said, as she paused.

"Yes," she murmured, turning away her head to hide the tears which sprang to her eyes. "The fact is," she added, recovering herself with a little bit of a laugh, "we had rather a quarrel about it this morning. Bruce says that he counts upon me to make friends with your aunt; and she is certainly very much offended by my refusal to accompany her—"

"Then you refused?"

"Yes, at first. I am afraid I was very cross about it, and Bruce at once said I should not go since I disliked it so much, and bid me go to my mother instead. But—I know he is vexed with me, and thinks me fanciful and selfish. So I have just written to Mrs M'Mickie to say I will go with her."

"I think you are very foolish," said Sir Eldred warmly. "Bruce can have no idea what Mrs M'Mickie's home is like, or he would never have thought of sending you to her."

"Wouldn't he?" she asked, wearily, "I don't know. Of course the girls' interests are

greatly at stake; and it seems right I should do my best for them."

"But not right that you should sacrifice yourself to such an extent. I know you will not accuse me of interested motives in urging you to give up this plan."

"Oh, no; I know *you* would not put yourself out of the way to get money from anyone," she replied, with the faintest possible stress on the "you." "I would not take so much trouble to get money for myself or my own family," she added. "But if Bruce thinks it necessary—" and she made an expressive gesture with her hands. "I am sure I would a great deal rather you got Mrs M'Mickie's money than the girls," she added, quickly.

"Thanks," he replied, smiling, but colouring. "But money is not everything, and if Bruce agreed to your going to your mother—"

"You don't understand," she interrupted; "he has *agreed* to my going to my mother because he would not appear to force my inclinations; but—but he will never forgive me if I make an enemy of Mrs M'Mickie—"

She paused, faltering, and turning away her face, raised her hand furtively to brush away the starting tears.

"Don't fret, Constance," said Sir Eldred, taking her other hand, and holding it gently

in his own. "You are tired and upset, and take too gloomy a view of things."

"It isn't going to Scotland with Mrs M'Mickie that I mind so much," she said, with a quiver in her voice, after struggling silently for a minute with the ball in her throat. "It—it is going to Blankshire alone —without Bruce; it is—humiliating. And that—Bruce should *wish* me—to go!"

"It's an infernal shame!" were the words that rose to the young man's lips, but he restrained them for *her* sake, and sought to comfort her instead.

"Bruce doesn't understand," he said, gently, though his heart was burning with indignation against his cousin. "I am sure he couldn't understand how you would feel it, or he would never have wished you to go."

"He knew how much I disliked going, yet he still wished me to go *in his heart*, though he said I was to go to mother, because he did not consider it *right* to force me north against my will," she said, with quivering lips and a suppressed bitterness that cut him to the heart. It was so utterly opposed to her whole nature to be bitter.

"Don't speak like that, Constance," he said, gently; "it isn't like you."

"Oh, I am growing horrid, I know!" she exclaimed, starting up and beginning to pace

hastily up and down, sobbing unrestrainedly as she did so. "Oh, I know it is very wrong of me to speak of Bruce so—very wrong! What can you think of me?"

Sir Eldred was deeply dismayed at this unexpected turn of affairs. He was sorry for her, but he could do nothing but look on in silence, waiting till she should grow quieter. If he had been her husband or brother, he would have known how to comfort her, but as it was, he had to stand silent and watch her suffering, with knit brow and tightly-clenched teeth.

"Constance, Constance! try to calm yourself," he cried, presently. "There is some one at the door."

She threw herself into an easy-chair, and tried to conceal her tears, while Sir Eldred opened the door, and took a note from the servant without.

"From Mrs M'Mickie," he said, as he handed it to Constance. "I will just stay to hear what she says, and then I must be off," he added.

"She says I may go with her," replied Constance wearily, handing him the note. "She leaves to-morrow morning instead of the day after, so my maid will have hard work to pack. I must tell her at once, I suppose."

"And I must go—by Jove! yes; it's past

ten o'clock. Good-night, Constance. I wish I could do anything for you."

"Thanks," she replied, with a little sigh; "but I am afraid you can't. Good-bye; you —you have been very kind to me, and I thank you."

Sir Eldred tore down the stairs, with a choking feeling in his throat, and a murderous feeling in his heart towards his cousin Bruce.

"The big brute!" he muttered, "to treat her like that. Most men would think themselves only too fortunate to have such a wife; but Bruce would be just as well content if she were an old fright like Aunt Jemima" (Mrs M'Mickie).

In his wrath and hot sympathy for Constance, the young man quite overlooked the other side of the case. Perhaps it was natural that Constance should feel hurt; but perhaps too she made too much of her grievance.

The London season had been too much for her, and doubtless the fact of her nerves being already overwrought, made her take a more depressing view of things than was necessary. But be that as it may, the consequences were equally disastrous, and the events of that day were to bear bitterer fruit than Bruce Moncrieffe had counted upon.

CHAPTER VII.

A MELANCHOLY HOME-COMING.

AND so it came about that, on the first day of July, Constance found herself speeding along in the train, with Mrs M'Mickie, Miss Trotter, and Mr Macdougal. The weather had been dry for some time, and the dust flew in clouds through the windows, which Mrs M'Mickie insisted on keeping wide open, one of her hobbies being that fresh air was wholesome, and that you could not have too much of it. As the day was grey and cloudy, and the wind due east, the carriage had the double disadvantage of being both dusty and cold; but as this was Mrs M'Mickie's doing, no one durst object.

At first Constance tried to beguile the time with a novel, but Mrs M'Mickie seized it unceremoniously out of her hands, and flung it through the window, remarking tersely that it

was "a filthy piece of literature." So after that Constance had to content herself with watching the flying landscape through the dust. She was not in a mood to read fortunately, but none the less did she resent the uncivil removal of her book, and her heart sank as she contemplated spending several weeks with this dreadful party.

Mr Macdougal annoyed her almost as much as his patroness. He was so sickeningly civil and attentive, and irritated her almost beyond endurance by the little airs of devotion which he gave himself. If she turned her head, he inquired instantly if she had lost anything; and if she moved a quarter of an inch on her seat, he would offer to change places with her, or insist on placing his bundle of rugs beneath her feet as a footstool. And all this he did with an air of affected gallantry that would have moved Mrs Moncrieffe to laughter had anyone else been the object of his attentions. But since they were directed towards herself, they inspired her merely with profound impatience and disgust.

"Sandy Macdougal, I'm thinking you're a fool," remarked Mrs M'Mickie laconically, at length, in her harsh Scotch accent.

Her mother had been Scotch, and on the death of her father, Sir Wilfred Glendower, which had occurred when she was a child,

she and her two sisters had returned to Scotland with their mother, where they had remained until the fair Jemima was thirty years of age, when she had met her first fate, Mr Bland, the wealthy City man. Consequently, Mrs M'Mickie's accent was decidedly Scotch, though she did not clip and generally mispronounce her words, after the manner of the orthodox Scotchwoman.

After reducing Mr Macdougal to abject silence by this last shot, she shut her eyes and appeared to doze (or meditate, as she termed it), though still sitting bolt upright. This sight inspired little Miss Trotter with courage, and she began a whispered conversation with Constance, for she was a genial little soul, and mighty fond of a chat, whenever she could get out of earshot of her dread cousin Jemima.

"Dear, dear, how strange it seems for you to visit Moncrieffe first with us, isn't it?" she chirped, regarding Constance with a kindly twinkle in her little, round, brown eyes. "It isn't often a bride visits her new home without her husband, is it? Poor Mr Moncrieffe must have been sadly put out at having to part from you, poor man. I suppose you have not heard any news of Mrs Fortescue yet? No, of course—no time for a letter. Eh, deary me! how well I re-

member her, poor body. She came up to visit her daughter at Moncrieffe, just about the time Harriet was born. Ah! the first Mrs Moncrieffe was a pretty creature too, though not to be compared to *you*, my dear —if I may call you dear. You look so sweetly at one, one can't stand on ceremony with you. Yes, yes, Bruce Moncrieffe has been a fortunate man with his wives. When his first died, he was fairly broken-hearted, so they said. No one expected he would marry again; but I remember, two years ago, he said something or another about thinking of giving his girls a mother— which, of course, they wanted badly, poor dears. And then folks said he wanted an heir—"

"Patsey, hold your tongue," remarked Mrs M'Mickie, suddenly opening her eyes; and this unexpected observation had such an effect upon poor Miss Trotter's nerves, that she relapsed into silence, without venturing to add, as she had intended to do, that of course Moncrieffe must have fallen over head and ears in love with Constance for her own sake, the instant he set eyes on her.

For some time silence reigned throughout the carriage, but presently Constance was roused, just as she was falling into a doze,

by feeling Miss Trotter fidgeting uneasily about on the next seat.

"What is it?" she inquired, opening her eyes languidly.

"Oh! oh dear! oh dear me!" gasped the little woman, afraid of disturbing Cousin Jemima, but too anxious to keep still. She rose, and began fumbling hastily among the various wraps in the netting, evidently in search of some missing article. "I've lost —I can't find—I've lost—I can't find—" she wailed, piteously, forgetful for the moment of cousin Jemima's presence.

"Well, what have you lost, Patsey?" demanded Mrs M'Mickie sourly.

"My—my black hand-bag! I—I can't see it *any*where! Oh dear, dear! where can I have lost it?"

"Isn't that it, hanging by your side, Miss Patsey?" asked Constance.

"Eh, deary me! so it is," cried Patsey, with an hysterical laugh of relief. "I declare I quite forgot I'd tied it to my side for safety."

Mr Macdougal laughed rather rudely Constance thought; and Mrs M'Mickie observed that Patsey was "only a poor senseless body," after which they all relapsed into a silence, which remained unbroken till they reached the town of Blank, where they slept the night.

The following morning they again set out for Dunkillie, after which they had a longish drive to Drum. They passed the gates of the Moncrieffe Park, and Mr Macdougal pointed them out to Mrs Moncrieffe with eager satisfaction.

"You behold before you the gates of the place which is now your home, Mrs Moncrieffe," he said, wriggling all over with delight, and washing his hands vigorously. "Strange that *I*, who am but a humble blade of grass, growing at the gates of your lordly mansion, should be the happy means of first introducing it to your notice! See, you can obtain a glimpse of the castle itself through those trees."

But Constance declined to turn her head, or indeed take any notice of Mr Macdougal's speech. She was keenly aware that her own husband ought to have introduced her to his home before any one else, and resented the minister's words as an impertinence — which was the last thing poor Mr Macdougal had dreamed of.

"And that's Drum," cried Miss Patsey, at length; and Constance did raise her head somewhat eagerly at this, for she was very weary, and was sincerely glad that they had reached the end of their journey.

They drove in through a narrow iron gate,

and between two stiff beech hedges (on the other sides of which lay corn and turnip fields), which led straight up to the front door of what looked uncommonly like a well-to-do farm-house. And, in truth, it had been so originally, and Mrs M'Mickie had some land in her own hands, which she amused herself by farming—at a loss. Constance was somewhat surprised to see the door of this humble dwelling opened by a religious looking man-servant, in a plain suit of black. It seemed out of character with the rest of the place; but even Mrs M'Mickie could be inconsistent sometimes. They all marched solemnly through a small square hall, into a small square drawing-room (or parlour, as it was usually termed), where two elderly ladies, Miss Jane and Miss Sophy Glendower, stood waiting to receive their sister in respectful silence. She allowed each to imprint a trembling salute on her yellow cheek, and then presented Constance to them, and bid one of them see about getting a room ready for her; for no intimation had she thought fit to send them of Mrs Moncrieffe's advent.

Miss Jane hurried away, mumbling something about "airing," and "sheets," and the others proceeded to the dining-room, where a heavy mid-day dinner awaited them. Mr

Macdougal said a long grace, and then they all sat down, and ate the portions given to them by Mrs M'Mickie. No one left anything on their plates but Constance, whose appetite seemed suddenly to have deserted her at sight and smell of the food. Mrs M'Mickie regarded her sternly for a few minutes, but made no comment on her wastefulness, to the surprise of every one present.

This room too was small, and square, and gloomy; the day outside was cold and grey as only a Scotch spring day can be; and the talk of the old ladies round the table fell entirely upon "serious" matters. The good sermon the minister of D— had preached last Sabbath forenoon; the sudden "conversion" of old Judy M'Nab; and—by way of worldly gossip—the exact price which Mrs Davidson, the doctor's wife, had paid for her new silk gown. "Such shameful extravagance, with all those children to provide for, and a husband who was so delicate!"

After dinner Constance retired to her own room to rest (and, if the truth be added, cry), and did not return downstairs till tea time, at six o'clock.

Mrs M'Mickie scowled, when she heard that she had been "resting," and remarked acidly that if she slept all day,

she need not complain if she lay "awake all night."

After tea there was nothing to be done but sit in the square "parlour" and work (since novels were forbidden) till nine o'clock, when there were family prayers; after which Constance escaped to her own room, without waiting for the supper which followed the prayers. It was still quite light when she got upstairs, and it seemed absurd to go to bed before it was dark. Since it was supposed to be summer, no fire was lighted in her room, which felt cold and chilly from want of use, and partly because the weather too was cold. A melancholy thrush was piping its last good-night outside her window, which was in front of the house, and commanded a view down the straight "drive."

The ground outside looked damp and sodden, as if there had been a good deal of rain lately, Constance remarked drearily, as she lifted the white blind, and looked out. The moon had risen amidst some watery-looking clouds, and a distant dog (one of the inmates of Moncrieffe's kennels) was baying dismally at it. A bat or two flitted past in the raw, damp air; and several wild rabbits were feeding in the field in front. No other signs of life were visible about the place, and Constance turned back disconsolately to her chill room, which seemed

all the more comfortless by reason of the cold daylight. Undressing herself as fast as she could (Mrs M'Mickie objected to strange maids, so she had left hers in London), and creeping into bed, she sobbed herself to sleep. What a welcome home was this!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SUN BEGINS TO SHINE.

DAY followed day at Drum with wearisome regularity. There were the same meals, the same prayers, and the same topics of conversation all the week round. Morning prayers were at eight, and woe betide the unhappy wretch who was five minutes late for them! Breakfast was at half-past eight, and after that everyone was expected to work in the drawing-room till twelve, when the whole party sallied out for a long walk. At two there was dinner, and after that another walk. Tea was at six, after which they all read, worked, or dozed in the parlour till nine, when they had prayers for half-an-hour; then cold supper, and at half-past ten o'clock punctually, bed. Such was the unvarying routine of daily life at Drum, and Constance was careful to conform to it, for since she had come here to

please Mrs M'Mickie, what was the use of offending her needlessly?

She did not eat much certainly, and she declined firmly to join in the long walks—or indeed to go out of doors at all; but these were the only respects in which she offended, and Mrs M'Mickie was graciously pleased to overlook these shortcomings in Constance, though whether she would have done so in anyone else, was more than doubtful. And certainly Constance behaved very well. When Mrs M'Mickie objected to her crewel work as being "useless trash," she put it aside meekly, and allowed herself to be pressed into making cloaks and petticoats for poor people; and she did not refuse the various religious works which were forced upon her, but really read them—and did not find all of them as uninteresting as she had expected.

But she often left her food unfinished on her plate; she refused to go out; and her dress, though quiet, did not always please the tyrant of Drum. But gentle though Mrs Moncrieffe was, Mrs M'Mickie knew that it would be useless to attempt taking liberties with her, so she only grumbled a little at these offences, and perhaps liked Constance all the better for not yielding entirely to her. Sir Eldred and Constance both possessed the same charm for her—they were courteous and yielding to her

outwardly, but they never suffered her to set her foot upon their necks, as she did upon those of her sister and Miss Trotter.

Two or three days passed in this way, and then came Sunday, which was worse than other days, inasmuch as that they went to kirk twice; were deprived of even the sorry amusement of needle-work; were all expected to wear an extra solemn and mournful air; and had cold dinner—though this last affected Constance but little. Never had any day appeared so long and oppressive to her, and she found herself wondering in the middle of Mr Macdougal's second sermon, how many more of these "Sabbaths" she would have to endure.

She had written to Bruce the day after her arrival at Drum, to inform him of the step which she had taken, and when she came downstairs on Monday morning, she found a letter from him waiting for her. She had to defer reading it till after prayers, and then she opened it with a little nervousness, wondering what Bruce would say to her sudden journey north. Of course he would be pleased for the dear girls' sakes, and by the time he came down to Moncrieffe, he would have forgotten any little disagreeables there might have been between them, and they would be (outwardly) at peace again. In her heart Constance felt that she could never

entirely forgive her husband; and yet what was there in the late occurrences to rouse this sudden access of resentment in her? Had she not known from the first that her husband only valued her so far as she was of use to his daughters.

All these thoughts, and many more, surged through her mind as she sat through prayers, with her eyes fixed on Bruce's letter, and her ears deaf to the beautiful words which not even Mrs M'Mickie's Scotch accent and pharisaical delivery could entirely deface or rob of their charm. As soon as she was free to do so, she tore open the cover and began to read, not eagerly by any means (she felt too listless for that), but with more interest than she had exhibited in anything since her arrival at Drum.

Apparently Bruce was not so pacified as she had expected by her compliance with his wishes. His letter was cold and formal, and evidently written in displeasure. He was surprised, he said, to hear of Constance's sudden change of plans; and he hoped she was not martyrising herself on his account. Such a sacrifice, he assured her, was quite uncalled for, and he fancied he had explained this to her before they parted in London. Since she was at Drum, however, he hoped that she would not find it so disagreeable as she had

expected. There was a pony phaeton at Moncrieffe Castle which she might find useful, and the other horses and carriages would soon be down from London. If she found her life at Drum unpleasant, she could always remove to the castle; "and remember," he added, finally, "you are your own free mistress, and not my *bond slave.*"

There was no absolute reproach in the letter, but Constance saw that he was annoyed at the idea that she was making a martyr of herself, and the whole tone chilled and hardened her. His *bond slave!* They were the very words which she had cast in his teeth in their last dispute in London, and she saw, from the way in which he brought them up, that he had neither forgotten nor pardoned them. Nor would he ever do so! A man of his disposition would never scold or chide her openly; but neither would he forgive or forget her hasty words. Well, so be it then; they had never loved each other, so their inward estrangment would make little or no difference after all. Mrs M'Mickie's voice broke upon her musings, just as she had reached this very dreary conclusion.

"Get the east room ready without delay, Jane. Eldred Glendower is coming here in time for dinner to-day."

Eldred Glendower coming here, and to-day!

Constance raised her head quickly, as did the others, none of whom had had any idea that the baronet intended paying his aunt a visit.

"Lord a-mercy!" ejaculated Miss Trotter, opening her little round eyes to their widest extent, "is *he* coming here?"

"He is," was the curt rejoinder, and no one else ventured to ask more.

A faint flush of interest and pleasure passed for a moment over Constance's face. She knew without telling that Sir Eldred was coming here for *her* sake, because he knew she would be dull, and hoped to be able to make her visit here a little pleasanter for her. How good it was of him to come when he hated Drum so much; and how grateful she ought to be to him.

All the morning as she sat stitching in the drawing-room, her thoughts kept dwelling on the approaching arrival of the young man. When the others sallied forth for their matutinal constitutional at twelve o'clock, she declined to accompany them as usual. Eldred was to be here in time for the two o'clock dinner, and she wished to be at home to receive him when he should arrive. She felt unusually restless this morning, and a kind of subdued excitement seemed to oppress her, so she put on her hat and strolled out into the garden to relieve her feelings by a turn in the open air.

The weather which had been gloomy and depressing since her arrival at Drum, had suddenly cleared up; the air was fresh, bracing, and balmy; the sun bright, though not very powerful; and the sky clear and cloudless blue. Nature seemed to have sided with Sir Eldred in making this day seem a particularly cheerful one to Constance when compared with those she had lately spent at Drum.

She strolled about the garden for a little while, and then sat down beneath a fine old gean tree, the grass-grown roots of which made a comfortable seat. She was still in a state of stifled excitement and expectation. It would be delightful to have Eldred staying here in the very house with her, ever at hand to talk to, and walk with her; and already the whole aspect of the place seemed to have changed with his coming. Deep down in her heart there was a consciousness (it could scarcely be called a voice) that it would not be well for her and Eldred to be thus together; but she stifled it, and told herself that she was helpless.

How was she to avoid him? How—but a step behind made her turn her head to see the hero of her thoughts approaching leisurely along the old-fashioned path, lined on either side with box, behind which grew gooseberry

and currant bushes. He was stopping to examine the gooseberries, and did not see her, and she had time to notice how handsome he looked in his brown shooting cap, and how negligently graceful his attitude was. Then he turned away with a shrug of disgust from the still green fruit, and catching sight of Mrs Moncrieffe, hastened forward with a laughing exclamation of pleasure.

"The solemn old flunky in there (jerking his head towards the house) said you were in the garden, so I came out to look for you," he began, as he pressed her hand. "I see you have found out my favourite seat under the old gean. Ah! those black cherries look good. I vote we try some."

So saying, he proceeded to gather a large bunch, and then seating himself on the grass beside Constance, proceeded lazily to enjoy them, and also persuaded his companion to try some.

"And so you didn't know I was coming," he said, after Constance had expressed her surprise and pleasure at seeing him. "The old lady knew I was coming all along. I went to see her the morning after I said good-bye to you in town (Constance flushed brightly, for she was now deeply ashamed of the way she had spoken on that occasion), and told her she might expect me in a day or two, as soon

as I had settled my business in town. They were just about to start when I called, and neither Miss Patsey nor Mr Macdougal were in the room, or you would have heard of my intended visit from them."

"As it is, it has the double charm of being a surprise," she answered, sweetly. "Your being here will make the greatest difference to me," she added, gratefully.

"Will it?" asked the young man eagerly, and flushing like a girl with pleasure.

He had no idea that his cousin's wife regarded him as anything save a kind friend; but to him she seemed the sweetest and most lovable of women; and to find that his presence gave her pleasure, caused him untold delight.

It was very pleasant to him to sit on the soft turf by Constance's side, and see her smile and hear her laugh—a laugh which he knew he alone had power to call forth. And they were to be together and enjoy themselves like this for the next two or three weeks! Sir Eldred felt like a school-boy setting out on a holiday expedition, and he laughed and chatted on in his easy, amusing fashion, as he lay beneath the gean tree, till the distant sound of the dinner-bell startled him and his companion.

They rose hastily (for Mrs M'Mickie was particular about punctuality at dinner-time),

and made the best of their way indoors, where they found their hostess already seated at table, and looking rather sourer than usual.

"Well, Eldred," she observed, acidly, as her nephew saluted her, "I think it would have been more seemly if you had sought me earlier on your arrival, instead of lying on your back on the ground, staring up at the sky like a moon-struck lunatic. I saw you well from the upper window, though you didn't know it."

"Yes, we were *all* watching you," struck in Miss Patsey, simpering.

"I did not know you had returned from your walk, madam," replied the young man, colouring slightly, as he seated himself beside Constance.

"No, nor you didn't care to find out," added the aunt amiably.

However, after this burst of displeasure, she thawed somewhat, and the remainder of the meal passed off pacifically enough. Mrs M'Mickie was secretly amused by her nephew's languid flow of wit, and liked the sight of his bright, handsome, young face at her table; and the other old ladies also grew more lively under the combined influence of the interest inspired by the new arrival and Mrs M'Mickie's unusual good humour. Indeed, Sir Eldred's coming seemed to have inspired new life into the whole household, and to have

brought brightness into each dark nook and corner. Little Miss Patsey fancied that it must be owing to Sir Eldred's presence that the sun shone so gaily into the grim dining-room; and perhaps Mrs Moncrieffe thought the same in her secret heart. She had actually a little colour in her cheeks to-day, and ate more dinner than usual, and Mrs M'Mickie remarked that she looked a deal better already for taking a breath of fresh air in the garden, and that if she would only walk round the farm with her (Mrs M'Mickie rented a little land from Moncrieffe, which she farmed herself) she would soon be quite strong and hearty.

Sir Edward shuddered at the idea of Constance's ever being "hearty;" and then he met Constance's eye and smiled, whereat she smiled too, and Miss Patsey wondered what they were laughing at one another like that for.

With some difficulty Sir Eldred excused himself from accompanying the old ladies on the afternoon's walk, on the plea of having letters to write; but as soon as they were fairly out of the house, he strolled into the drawing-room, where Constance was sewing, with a short note in his hand, which represented the important letters which he had pleaded to Mrs M'Mickie.

"I thought you were going to write," said Constance demurely, as he entered.

"So I have been," he replied, sinking into a seat beside her.

"And is that the extent of your correspondence?"

"And quite enough too. Awful bore having to write at all. Mean to keep a fellow to do all that sort of thing for me when my ship of diamonds comes home. What are you doing? Oh, lining a cloak. Stiff work isn't it?"

"Rather worse than writing letters."

"Why do you do it?"

"To please Mrs M'Mickie. Since I am here, I may as well do my duty and make friends of the old lady. Though I am sure I would far rather she left her money to you than to my step-daughters."

"Well, we won't discuss that knotty point. But tell me, how do you get on here?"

"Oh, well enough. Of course it is dull, and I don't like the rules of the house, and the plain sewing, and all that; but it won't last for ever."

"And does your husband know you are here yet?"

"Oh yes, I wrote and told him as soon as I arrived."

"And what did he say?"

"Here is the letter I received from him this morning," she replied, drawing it from her pocket, and handing it to him.

He read it through attentively, and indulged in a faint whistle as he came to the end.

"He doesn't seem much gratified by my having come here after all, does he?" she asked.

"No, I can't say he does. But what does he mean by calling you his bond slave, and underlining the words so?"

Constance blushed and bit her lip; she had forgotten that last sentence when she gave him the letter, and for a minute she hesitated whether to explain its full meaning to him or not.

"They were my own words," she said, at last, faltering. "I spoke them in a passion, and he knew I was too angry to think of what I was saying; but it seems he has not forgiven them."

"People don't forget disagreeable little things that are said in a fit of temper as readily as you seem to expect. A fellow like Moncrieffe would forgive a real injury sooner than a silly word like that," said the young man gravely.

"Yes, I know that quite well. And so Bruce and I are to remain eternal enemies

because I chanced to lose my temper one day!"

"Not so bad as that, I hope. But that is really a good suggestion of his about the pony carriage. Patsey says you have never been over to the castle yet. Let me walk over and order the *machine* (as they term all conveyances hereabouts) to come for you to-morrow morning, and we will drive up and see the old place together. What do you say?"

"I—I don't care about it," she faltered.

"But I do. I want particularly to be your cicerone. I shall make a very good one, I promise you, for I know the castle and grounds and all the country round very well."

"The pony carriage belongs to the girls."

"Well, do you suppose they can object to your using it when they aren't here?"

"I am sure they would."

"Well let them then. After all, it is yours by rights."

"I don't care to go."

"Then you ought to care. See, there are the old ladies returning; I think I shall go out and carry my note to the post. May I not continue my walk as far as the castle and order the *machine?*"

"Well, if you like," replied Constance, half-provoked, half-laughing, aud so the matter was settled.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISIT OF INSPECTION.

THE following morning dawned bright and sunny, and at ten o'clock the pretty pony carriage came to the door to convey Mrs Moncrieffe to the castle. Sir Eldred of course drove her, and they set off in good spirits. Constance had apparently got over her objection to visiting her own home without her husband, and enjoyed the short drive exceedingly. She even felt a little curiosity and interest as they entered the park, and gazed around her with real admiration as they proceeded along the winding drive which led by a gradual ascent to the castle. The park was large and well planted with trees, many of which were old and well grown, and it was some time before they came in sight of the castle itself. When they did, the young *chatelaine* was for a

minute disappointed, for, in common with most Scotch castles, it was ugly, and almost shabby looking (for an old castle) outside. It was built of grey granite, and save for the old square keep, had nothing castle-like in its appearance. But the view and situation were perfect.

Behind rose rugged hills, covered with heath and firs; while in front the hill on which it was perched sloped abruptly down to the lovely valley of the river Tay, on the opposite side of which again rose hill upon hill, covered with rock, forest, or moor. It was a lovely scene, viewed in the bright July sunshine, and the fresh, invigorating mountain air added to the charm. Sir Eldred checked the carriage for a minute, to give his companion time to admire the prospect, and then drove slowly up to the door, a small, iron-studded thing, which hid away in a curve of the thick wall, as if it were ashamed of itself. It was opened to them after several minutes by an old servant in Highland dress, who was Moncrieffe's private piper (the other men servants had not yet arrived from London).

"This is Duncan, of whose fame as a piper I am sure you must often have heard," said Sir Eldred pleasantly; and the old man saluted the new lady respectfully, and

was much gratified when she said she had heard of his piping, and hoped to hear him perform soon. There were no other servants assembled to receive her, though Sir Eldred had informed Mrs Dean, the housekeeper, of Mrs Moncrieffe's intended visit. She was new at playing her part of great lady, however, and felt rather relieved that her home-coming was so quiet and unostentatious. Since she came without her husband, the quieter her arrival was the better.

The entrance-hall was large and dark, paved with red flags, and with red stone pillars; while round it hung stags' heads, antlers, and weapons of divers sorts and kinds. Sir Eldred suggested that Mrs Dean should be sent for, and then led Constance into the dining-hall, a large, handsome apartment, with a carved oak ceiling, and panelled walls, and a polished oak floor.

"Bruce's father constructed this room, and the drawing-room above. All the rooms in the castle were about the size of pigeon holes, so the old man knocked out this wing," explained Sir Eldred, in his capacity of cicerone. "I can't tell you what style it is, or anything of that sort—indeed I don't think the old gentleman cared much about style, and that sort of thing—but, anyway,

it looks awfully handsome, don't you think so?"

Constance assented; and they next made their way to the smoking-room, a cosy retreat, hung round with striped shawls and scarfs, and with a multitude of strange-looking weapons ranged in patterns on the walls. Then they visited the library and the billiard-room (a late addition of Bruce's), and finally made their way upstairs to the drawing-room, which was large and handsome, but somewhat too heavy for Constance's taste.

"This would be a jolly room for a hop," said Sir Eldred, trying the polished oak boards where they were left uncovered by the carpet, with his foot. "You must get Bruce to give a ball some of these days."

"It is rather too dark for a drawing-room, I think," said Mrs Moncrieffe doubtfully. "But what a lovely view from the windows!"

Here a rustle of silk was heard at the door, and Mrs Dean, a fine-looking woman of sixty, entered, and curtsied stiffly to her new mistress. She had been nurse to the first Mrs Moncrieffe, and afterwards to her children, and had finally been appointed housekeeper at Moncrieffe.

Constance knew that the girls were very fond of her, and she naturally supposed that the woman would not be very amicably dis-

posed towards herself. She left Sir Eldred in the drawing-room, and went off with Mrs Dean to inspect the rest of the house. In vain she tried to speak kindly to her guide; the housekeeper replied civilly, but as briefly as possible, and the new mistress soon relinquished the attempt to conciliate her. They went by a stone staircase up to the keep, where Mrs Moncrieffe's own room was situated. It was the only good-sized room in the old part of the castle, but it was dark and sombre looking, with small high windows, set in the deep recesses of the thick walls.

"This is Mr Moncrieffe's dressing-room next door," said Mrs Dean, advancing to another room, smaller, but equally gloomy.

"And what is that door?" asked Constance, pointing to a third door on the opposite side of the bedroom.

"Oh, that leads to a sort of private staircase, madam."

Constance opened the door, and beheld a flight of dark, narrow stone steps, leading apparently to an upper apartment.

"Where do they go to?" she inquired.

"To the room above, madam."

"What sort of room is it?"

"Nothing particular to look at, madam. They do say it is haunted."

"Haunted!"

"Yes, madam. Some old prisoner was once kept up there and murdered—so they say; and sometimes they fancy they still hear him walking about and clanking his chains."

"How very uncomfortable," said Mrs Moncrieffe. "Why did Mr Moncrieffe choose such a part of the house to sleep in?"

"I don't know, madam. This room has always been occupied by the head of the house (they say it was one of the old Moncrieffes who murdered his prisoner with his own hands), and I don't suppose Mr Moncrieffe would like to change it."

"I daresay," said the young mistress coldly.

She gave one more look up the dreary staircase, and then shut the door, with a little shiver, which caused the housekeeper to ask, with a suppressed smile,—

"Of course you do not believe in ghosts, Mrs Moncrieffe?"

"Of course not," replied Constance coldly.

They soon went over the rest of the house, and then rejoined Sir Eldred, who carried Constance off to visit the garden and grounds. They had promised to return to Drum in time for dinner, so declined Mrs Dean's offer of lunch, and set out on their homeward way as soon as they had finished their inspection.

Constance told Sir Eldred about the ghost, and was much relieved by the way in which he laughed away her superstitious fears, and turned the ghost into ridicule, declaring that no one would think of keeping a prisoner over their bedroom, and suddenly murdering him with their own hands in cold blood. His arguments might not be very logical, but they answered their purpose and restored Constance to equanimity again.

After this, Sir Eldred took Constance out driving every day. He persuaded her to let him drive her about the different parts of the country, and got her to take an interest in superintendiug the preparation of Dunfern Cottage, her mother's future residence. Mrs de Vere was to come down on the twenty-eighth of that month, and Constance found plenty to occupy her at Dunfern Cottage. It was only two miles from Moncrieffe Castle, and Constance would have been delighted at the prospect of being so close to her own people had she not known that her step-daughters would be sure to clash with them.

The weather had cleared up with Sir Eldred's arrival, and remained steadily fine during the remainder of July. Whether it was owing to this, or to Sir Eldred's presence, Constance did not find Drum as unpleasant as she had at first imagined it to be. In the mornings

she drove out with the baronet, and in the afternoons they sat lazily under the old gean tree, and talked, or else he read aloud to her. The evenings in the drawing-room were the only unpleasant times, and often, when the air was not too fresh, they would wander out into the garden then. Mrs M'Mickie saw nothing amiss in all this, though she grumbled at it, as she considered herself bound to do at everything. She had been secretly uneasy at the listlessness and utter want of energy which Constance had exhibited during her first week at Drum, and was considerably relieved to see her spirits and appetite recovering so rapidly. Driving was better than moping indoors all day (though no doubt walking would be a deal better than either), and since Eldred was fit for nothing else, it was just as well he should make himself useful and amuse the poor, senseless young woman a bit. This was how Mrs M'Mickie put it, and the young people did their best not to offend her prejudices in any way. Constance still laboured assiduously at the cloaks and petticoats when she sat with Sir Eldred under the gean tree on the sunny afternoons; she was punctual at meals, waded through tracts, and went to kirk twice every Sabbath, on which day she heroically relinquished even her stroll with Sir Eldred in the

garden, and resigned herself to being bored and miserable for twelve hours. And this sufficed to satisfy Mrs M'Mickie that all was as it should be, and though she found constant fault with her guests, Sir Eldred always understood how to pacify her, and cajole her back into a good humour.

And so three short sunny weeks slipped by, and Constance found her visit at Drum finished almost before she had realised that it had begun.

CHAPTER X.

BRUCE'S PLAN.

TO say that Moncrieffe was extremely angry with his wife for her unfortunate words, spoken in a fit of temper, would hardly describe his true feelings. He was deeply annoyed, and not a little offended; but he could hardly be said to be *very angry*.

It was a shock both to his pride and his kinder feelings to be informed that his wife was not happy in her married life; and in the first moments of vexation he had assumed a cold, displeased tone towards Constance, assuring himself that she was the only one in fault. If she was discontented it was no fault of *his*. He had been a good husband to her, and done all in his power to make her happy. He was very insistent on this point when reviewing the case in his own mind. He *had*

done all that was possible to make any sensible woman happy—of course he had. Of course Harry had been a trouble to her step-mother; but was it fair to blame him for this? *He* could not be answerable for his daughter's temper, and Constance was very unjust in laying all the blame on him. And then she had accused him of making her a bond slave to himself and his girls, because he had asked her to visit Mrs M'Mickie! Certainly he would not force her to go to Drum against her will. If she did not see herself that it was her duty to go, she should not go. He would show her that she was entirely her own mistress, and make her heartily ashamed of her words by his readiness to indulge her every wish.

Great was his irritation, therefore, when he received her letter informing him that she was actually at Drum. Of course she had gone there in a fit of temper, and would take a special pleasure in fancying herself a martyr, and him an exacting tyrant.

In his vexation he wrote her a cold, studied letter, in which he allowed his displeasure to appear sufficiently, without absolutely reproaching her. The last sentence was the only one in which he suffered any signs of temper to escape him, and even that was not very severe.

In the meantime he was secretly relieved that his wife had gone to Drum, as otherwise Mrs M'Mickie would have been irrevocably offended with the whole Moncrieffe family. He hoped he would not have to leave Constance long where she was, but everything depended upon Mrs Fortescue of course.

The old lady was very ill when the Moncrieffes first arrived at Brighton, and during the first week of their stay there, her life was almost despaired of. During the second week she improved rapidly however, and by the end of the third was pronounced out of danger, though still very weak after the attack. Adelaide, her youngest daughter's marriage, which had been postponed on account of her illness, was now again spoken of. Adelaide's *fiance* was going with his regiment to India in a few weeks, so there was no time to lose, and the ceremony was fixed to take place on the seventh of August.

Then both Harry and Julia came to their father and prayed and coaxed him to let them stay for their cousin's wedding. At first he refused firmly, but just at this time he received a letter from Sir Eldred, saying that he was at Drum, and that Constance was quite well and in good spirits, and he decided to do as his daughters wished, since his wife was not unhappy at Drum. After all, a fortnight

could make very little difference one way or other, and if Eldred were at Drum, Constance would never want for pleasant companionship.

By this time his resentment towards his wife had considerably abated. He was too just to blame her long without pausing to consider her side of the case, and he began to see that she had had a good deal to try her. She had spoken wrongly no doubt in her passion, but do we not all do wrong sometimes? and she was young, and not very strong, and no doubt she had been overwrought and excited when she spoke as she did. How good she had always been to the girls, and how sweetly she had borne with Harry's tantrums! Looking back, he confessed that he had never had occasion to find a single fault with her (until the unfortunate question about her visit to Drum was raised); and then came the natural question, could she say the same of him? She had accused him of coldness, and want of affection, and he began to fear that perhaps he had been unconsciously reserved and undemonstrative towards her. He had not meant this to be so, but it had come about almost without his being aware of it. The

girls had thrust themselves between them, and Constance had drawn herself back, and so it had appeared as if he thought more about his daughters than his wife. Ah, there was the secret of the complication! In his heart he was distinctly conscious that he cared for the girls before Constance; but he had never intended her to see this. Yet she had done so, and perhaps it was natural she should feel sore and hurt. Yet how well she had behaved in spite of it all!

And after all why should he be angry with her for going to Drum? There had been nothing of the martyr's tone in her letter; she had simply said that she saw she had been wrong to refuse to go to Drum, and that she would not have been happy with her mother, feeling that she had neglected her duty to the girls. She had begged him to forget anything she had said in the heat of temper, and assured him that she was sorry for her past petulance. And he had replied by casting her words back in her teeth! It was now more than three weeks since the scene in the London drawing-room, and Bruce was sufficiently cooled to regret that he had written that

letter. It was not an unkind letter; oh no, decidedly it was not unkind (and he was glad he had said what he had about the carriage, for that at least showed that he thought of Constance's comfort); but still it was not as kind as it might have been. Constance was already hurt, and probably his letter had deepened the wound. Well, it could not be helped now; after all there was not much harm done yet, and he would write Constance another and a kinder letter that would set all right between them. So he sat down and penned an epistle to Constance, informing her that Adelaide's marriage was fixed to take place in a fortnight, and that Harry and Julia were so anxious to stay for it, that he had at last consented to do so. They would be at Moncrieffe Castle on the ninth of August, but as soon as Mrs de Vere arrived at Dunfern Cottage, Constance might move to the castle and get her sister Pearl to keep her company at it. Pearl would be a charming companion for Harry and Julia, he wrote, and he hoped Mrs de Vere would allow her to remain a long time at the castle. He also added that he was writing to invite Sir Eldred to Mon-

crieffe for the twelfth, and suggested that Constance should ask him to move to the castle when she and Pearl took up their abode at it.

He was not a very good hand at letter writing, and though his words were kind, there was a certain stiffness in his tone which caused Constance to smile when she read his letter. Evidently the fortnight which had elapsed since he wrote his former letter had considerably softened his feelings towards her, she perceived with a sigh of relief. Peace, peace, was all she longed for. Anything to save them from a cat-and-dog life.

It was this which had caused her to acknowledge herself in the wrong, and apologise for anything she had said to vex him, when she wrote to Moncrieffe, rather than any real feeling of contrition. She felt, on the contrary, that she *had* done well to be angry; but still she had thought it better to seek peace, and now she was relieved to see that her proffered olive branch had been accepted, though she was also indignant with her husband for not having accepted it sooner.

"Dear me, have you been here a whole

fortnight?" said Constance, dropping her letter on her lap, and gazing up incredulously at Sir Eldred.

The afternoon post had just come in, and they were reading their letters side by side under the old gean tree.

"Yes, now you mention it, I believe I have," he replied, lazily. "I've just got a scrawl from Bruce, asking me to Moncrieffe."

"So he tells me. Does he mention any time?"

"He leaves that to you, he says," replied the young man, laughing.

Constance was silent, and taking up her husband's letter, pretended to be reading it again. Had he said anything to his cousin about going to the castle with her and Pearl? or had he left it to her to make the suggestion? If he had done the former, she must certainly ask Sir Eldred too; but if not, would it not be better for the baronet to remain at Drum? She was vexed that Bruce should have invited him at all, for in a conversation which they had had in London respecting the guests to be invited to Moncrieffe that autumn, she had let him see plainly that she did not wish Sir Eldred to be one of them. But he had chosen

to disregard her wishes in this respect, and why should she concern herself to keep Sir Eldred at a distance?

She was sore and indignant, too, because her husband was going to stay on at Brighton, now that Mrs Fortescue was pronounced out of danger, instead of hastening back to her. True, he seemed anxious to save her from spending more time than possible at Drum, and appeared pleased that she had so pleasant a companion as Sir Eldred to divert her; but still, he would not move a finger *himself* to cut her visit at Drum short. Why did he not come home at once, if he were as anxious as he said about her welfare? Yet, all the same, Constance felt rather relieved that he was not coming home yet.

"Bruce is not coming home till the ninth of next month," she said, presently, breaking the silence that had fallen over them.

"So he tells me," replied the young man, rather coldly—or so she fancied.

She glanced at him furtively, wondering *how* Bruce had worded his invitation to him; but Sir Eldred was intent upon pulling a daisy to pieces, and his face gave her no clue.

"He wants me to move to the castle before them," she proceeded.

"And take your sister with you," added the baronet.

How much or how little *had* Bruce said to his cousin? If he had even hinted at the possibility of his wife's inviting him (Sir Eldred) to stay with her before the twelfth, then she must certainly do so. No one should ever have cause to suppose that she was *afraid* of trusting herself with her husband's handsome cousin.

"He suggests that you should join us when we go there," she said, slowly, watching to note the effect of her words on her companion.

He coloured slightly, and replied coldly,—

"He said something of the sort to me."

"Of course you will come," she said, thankful that she had spoken as she had.

"I don't know," replied the young fellow gravely.

"Oh, nonsense! You know you must come."

"I do not think you want me."

"What a huffy tone! I did not think you

were so silly. Of course I want you; so you really must tear yourself away from Drum and come. Pearl and I shall be very dull by ourselves, unless you will come to enliven us."

"All right, then, I'll take compassion on you," he answered, with restored good humour. "I shall not be sorry to get away from Drum, I can tell you."

It was about a week after this that Mrs de Vere and her family arrived at Dunfern Cottage. They were to arrive in time for early dinner, and Constance drove over to receive them on their arrival. She would have liked to stay to tea, and spend the entire evening with them; but as this would have offended Mrs M'Mickie, she had to content herself with dining with them, and Sir Eldred promised to call and escort her back to Drum (the two houses were only half-a-mile apart) in time for tea.

She asked him to come and receive her mother with her, but he refused, thinking the mother and daughter would like to be alone together at first. In this, however, he was mistaken, for Constance shrank sensitively

from the questions which she knew her mother would ask, and which she would find so hard to answer. She had never hinted to her mother that she was not perfectly happy; but she was conscious that there had been a want in her letters since her marriage, and that Mrs de Vere must have remarked it. She stood at the porch of the pretty, ivy-covered cottage, watching the distant road anxiously for the first sign of the travellers, and wondering nervously whether they would find her much changed, and whether she would be able to laugh at the boys' jokes as she used to do in the old days, when she was poor and had to work for her living. But as soon as she caught sight of the carriage (she had sent her own carriage to meet them at the station, the horses and servants having lately arrived from town) toiling along the steep road, she forgot everything except her longing to see those dear faces again, and feel her mother's loving arms around her once more. They were coming! they had turned the corner and were hidden by the garden wall; now they were turning in at the gate—driving round the little grass plot—alighting—and

Constance knew no more till she found herself sobbing in her mother's arms, in the midst of the little family group.

"Come, I say, what's the good of howling like that?" remarked Frank unfeelingly.

"Oh, of course it's very natural she should be glad to see us again" (as Pearl reproved him in an under tone), "but she might take a more cheerful way of showing her delight."

Constance raised her head from her mother's shoulder, and smiled through her tears. Frank, though a nice-looking lad, could hardly be termed very handsome; but at this minute his sister thought him one of the finest-looking youths she had ever seen. Indeed she was quite struck by the good looks of all her family, and wondered that she had never remarked the boys' beauty before. She embraced them all, half-laughing, half-crying; and their warm brotherly hugs sent a thrill of pleasure through her now, though in former days she had frequently found them too rough.

"How pretty you have grown, Pearl," she said, as she led her mother and sister into the simple but pretty drawing-room—alas! how

long would the boys suffer it to retain its fresh daintiness!

Pearl laughed and blushed as she replied that Constance was looking very well too.

"Yes, indeed you are, my dear," added the mother; and then the boys called out for dinner, and they all repaired to the dining-room, where a comfortable repast awaited them.

During the meal, Constance unfolded her plan for carrying Pearl off to the castle with her, and the girl's eyes sparkled, and she listened breathlessly to hear if her mother would give her consent.

"I think she might have asked one of *us* too," whispered Fred to Charlie, the youngest hope of the family; and Charlie agreed by a gloomy nod.

"Well, we will think about it," said Mrs de Vere, who wished to find out from Constance privately how far Pearl would really be welcome at Moncrieffe Castle; and the young girl sighed resignedly, fearing lest she should not be permitted to accompany her sister after all.

The boys were full of questions and jokes,

and their noisy chatter repeatedly drowned the softer tones of their mother and sisters. What sort of girls were Harry and Julia Moncrieffe? and how did Constance get on with them? Had Bruce got good shooting, and would he let them have a day's shooting sometimes? And would she (Constance) lend them a mount now and then? These and many other questions poured upon Constance from her brothers, and she found herself sadly at a loss how to answer them. At last, when Frank coolly suggested that she should ask her husband for permission for them to shoot rabbits whenever they pleased, she lost her patience, and informed the lad sharply that he was very impertinent and forward, and that she had nothing to do with her husband's shooting arrangements, and did not choose to interfere with them.

"Oh! I see how it is," retorted Frank angrily. "Prosperity has ruined you. You used to be the jolliest girl in the world, and always ready to go shares with one in everything; and now you have grown quite the grand lady, forsooth, and tell a fellow he is impertinent if he asks for anything. Well,

I'll take jolly good care never to fire a shot on *your* preserves, even if you go down on your knees to ask me. May we go, mother? We've all done."

Mrs de Vere gave her consent, and the boys trooped out of the room, all looking aggrieved and huffy, though in a few minutes their loud laughs outside told that they had completely recovered their tempers again.

Constance had been prevented from replying to Frank's last thrust by a painful ball in her throat, and now she sat trying to look unconcerned, but painfully aware that her mother saw through her, and understood the cause of her unwillingness to ask her husband a favour for her brothers. She was vexed that her family should guess the true cause, and yet she could not endure that they should think her changed in any way towards them. So she sat and crumbled her bread in silence, till her mother's voice broke the uncomfortable pause, saying,—

"You know Jack's ship has arrived at Southampton?"

"No; has it?" asked Constance, roused to fresh animation by the prospect of again see-

ing her eldest and favourite brother. "And will he get away from it soon?"

"He expects to get leave in a few weeks," replied the mother; and then the conversation took a more cheerful turn, and Constance reverted to her original request to take Pearl to the castle with her.

"Well, until your husband and his daughters return," hesitated the mother, seeing the wistful look in Pearl's eyes.

"And after that too. Bruce asks it particularly; he thinks Pearl will be such a nice companion for Harry and Julia."

"Well, you will see when they come down how they get on together. I should not like Pearl to be in the way," said Mrs de Vere, who was inclined to be touchy with Moncrieffe since she shrewdly suspected that he was not making her child happy.

"When she is, I shall send her straight home," said Constance, with rather an uneasy laugh.

"And do you know, my dear, it does not seem to me quite the thing for you to be alone at Moncrieffe with a young man, and only Pearl for a chaperon.

"It is I who will be Pearl's chaperon," laughed Mrs Moncrieffe, blushing slightly. "And the plan was quite Bruce's own suggestion. You see, we are so intimate with his cousin Eldred."

"If your husband wishes it, of course I cannot oppose it," said the mother gravely, though in her heart she thought that Moncrieffe ought to take better care of his pretty young wife.

And so the thing was settled, and Mrs de Vere hurried off to see to her household arrangements, while the two sisters went upstairs to Pearl's room, and unpacked her box between them, Constance making a careful note of all the deficiencies in her sister's wardrobe.

"You must have some more gloves and ribbons, and things of that sort, to make you nice," she said. "We will drive down to Dunkillie, and see what we can find there. And I must get my maid to run you up a couple of little evening dresses when I get you over to Moncrieffe. But you needn't say anything to mother about it."

This Constance added because she feared her mother's pride might stand in their way.

She would on no account have spent her money on her sister had she supposed for a moment that Moncrieffe would have grudged it; but whatever he was, he was generous, and he had often impressed upon her that she was free to spend the money he gave her so liberally, as she pleased. So she had no scruples about giving the dresses to Pearl, only she knew how proud her mother was, and thought it advisable to say nothing to her until the things were purchased, and in Pearl's possession.

The two sisters worked about the house very happily for some time, Constance clinging close to Pearl in her anxiety to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with her mother. Pearl, however, felt herself in the way, and at last managed to leave Constance and her mother alone together in the latter's bedroom, where Mrs de Vere was unpacking a trunk, and slipped downstairs to the drawing-room, to enjoy a novel and a rest after her exertions of unpacking and setting things to rights. She had hardly settled herself in a comfortable chair, however, when she heard a manly step on the gravel path outside, and fancying it

was one of the boys, ran out to open the door before they could knock, knowing that the servants were busy. Instead of one of her brothers, however, she found herself confronted by a remarkably handsome young man, with a golden moustache, and smiling blue eyes. He was dressed to perfection in an easy country costume, and had altogether the air of what the boys would have termed "a swell."

"Miss de Vere, I presume?" he drawled, lifting his cap gracefully, and surveying the pretty maiden approvingly from beneath his long lashes.

She bowed shyly, and remarked that she thought it had been "one of the boys."

"And you are much disappointed to find it is only me?" he drawled in his dulcet tones, which Pearl was half inclined to think affected, yet did not altogether dislike. "I am sorry I am only myself, but it's not my fault, you know. Allow me to introduce Sir Eldred Glendower, at your service."

"Please come in," said Pearl, blushing, but laughing. "We have often heard of you from my sister."

"I hope she gave me a good character?" he said, as he followed his little hostess into the drawing-room.

"Oh yes—very. I will go and tell her and my mother you are here."

"On no account! Do not disturb them, I pray. I promised to walk home with your sister, but there is plenty of time. Won't you stay and talk to me yourself?"

Pearl sat down obediently, not ill-pleased at having the sole task of entertaining the good-looking stranger.

Conversation with Sir Eldred was never a difficult matter, and in a few minutes the two young people were chatting away as confidentially as if they had known each other intimately for years.

"And so you are going with us to Moncrieffe the day after to-morrow?" he said, presently. "I am glad of that, as otherwise I don't think your sister would have left Drum, and, consequently, I shouldn't have made my escape either. Do you know, Miss Pearl, my nerves are getting quite affected with living among such preternaturally pious folks as the old ladies of Drum. The constant sight of so

much angular virtue is too overpowering for a sinner like me. It deprives me of sleep by night and appetite by day. I know some frank friends have called me soft—"

"You're a big fool, you are!" screamed a voice, so close to the young man's shoulder that it made him start.

He turned round, and beheld a large grey parrot standing on the table at his elbow, regarding him knowingly, with its head on one side.

"You fool!" it repeated, winking, and hopping out of reach.

"Oh, that horrid bird!" began Pearl, half laughing, half angry, when a burst of loud mirth from the window made her look towards it, and perceive Charlie seated astride on the sill, with one leg outside and one dangling inside.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, beginning to beat a noisy tattoo with his heels.

"Oh, take care of the paint, Charlie!" pleaded his sister anxiously.

"Bother the paint!" cried the young mischief, swinging his feet with greater vigour than before. "'Cute old bird that, isn't it?"

he added, addressing Sir Eldred. "I say, do you know that riddle where you are asked,—'Would you rather be a greater fool than you look, or look a greater fool than you are?' Which do you say?"

"Well, it is a question that requires consideration," replied the baronet gravely.

"The answer's the same either way, you know—'Oh, *that* would be impossible!'" and with another burst of mirth Master Charlie swung himself off the window and disappeared.

"Nice boy that," remarked Sir Eldred, stroking his moustache reflectively. "Reminds me of what I was when I was a youngster."

"Charlie is the worst of all the boys," Pearl was beginning apologetically, when her mother and Constance entered, and stared in surprise to find Sir Eldred seated in the drawing-room, in deep converse with Pearl.

"What do you think of Pearl?" asked Mrs Moncrieffe, as she and her companion were walking back to Drum.

"I think I am more than half in love with her already," he replied, thoughtfully.

Constance laughed. She was in good spirits just now; her mother had had too much sense to ask any indiscreet questions, which had greatly relieved her mind, and she was thinking how pleasant it would be to be at Moncrieffe Castle, with no one but Sir Eldred and dear little Pearl for ten whole days!

CHAPTER XI.

ENLIGHTENMENT.

ABOUT this time a novel came out, written by a great author, which made a certain amount of stir in the world. It was not often that Bruce Moncrieffe read novels (wasted his time over them, he would have said); for, like many clever men, while he considered himself well employed when studying abstract questions of science, and took a keen interest in politics, he had no sympathy to spare for mere word-pictures (lifelike though they might be) of poor humanity's sufferings, joys, hopes, and fears. And, no doubt, many novelists use their pen chiefly to portray the pretty love-tales of pretty young people, rather than the

serious life-struggle of older and less interesting people. Yet, even in the simplest love-tale, there is surely a great deal of poetry—indeed all human emotions that are *real* must have some pathos and poetry in them; and—how painfully stupid the world will be when we are all too "sensible" to believe in romance, or be amused by anything that is not at once *learned* and *brilliantly clever!*

Moncrieffe was in the habit of denouncing all fancy literature as "trash" (nor could you induce him to admit that there might be exceptions to this sweeping condemnation), and smiling in a provokingly pitying and contemptuous manner when anyone suggested that surely such and such works of fiction did not deserve to be so summarily condemned. "Oh yes, there was something in that book," he would reply, with careless condescension. "Yes, certainly, the author must have had a certain amount of cleverness." But all the time there was an unbelieving smile in his eyes.

Yet, with one of those inconsistencies to which human nature—even scientific human nature—is liable, he took up the novel to

which we alluded at the beginning of the chapter, and in a fit of idleness began to read it. It was the story of a middle-aged man, who married a young girl of twenty, and brought her home to live with his mother and sisters. He was passionately attached to his bride, who also loved him devotedly ("sentimental stuff, I see," thought Bruce, who, we presume, saw something highly ludicrous in the fact of two people truly loving each other). But, unfortunately, the husband was reserved and undemonstrative in manner, and did not take pains to show his wife how much he cared for her, supposing that she knew it sufficiently well without more telling. She, on the other hand, was demonstrative and impulsive, and could not understand her husband's manner, which seemed to her cold and unfeeling. She was made unhappy, too, by her mother and sisters-in-law, who considered that their brother and son had made a *mésalliance;* yet when she complained to her husband, he treated her as if she had been a spoilt child, and declined to believe her tales, because she had nothing tangible to prove them with.

"A man does not understand how effectively

the women of his family can make an unwelcome newcomer miserable, without absolutely violating any established laws of politeness," wrote the author; and Bruce thought of his girls and Constance.

The end of the story, which was short, and told with simple pathos, was, that the foolish young wife, made wretched in her home, and unable to believe in her husband's love—of which she could see no sign—eloped with the gay deceiver of the tale, leaving a brief note behind her, reproaching her husband for his treatment of her, and assuring him that he alone was to blame for all that had happened. And, too late, the heart-broken man saw his mistake. A jealous young husband would have watched and guarded his wife from danger; whereas the middle-aged scholar had taken no care of her, and had left her to go about in society by herself, and get into what mischief she chose. And she had taken this negligence as a sign of his indifference; and reproached him with it in her parting note.

The book was only a short two volumes, and Bruce got through it in a few hours. What was there in that short, sad tale to hold

him entranced a whole afternoon? It was not true—it was only a "work of fiction!" Not for the world would he have confessed it to anyone, yet it was a fact that the novel had had power to move Moncrieffe deeply. Perhaps it was the fact of the heroine's name being Constance, and the hero aged forty (exactly his own age), that first caused him to see a fancied resemblance between the tale he had just read and his own history. This may seem absurd, yet nothing is more certain than that sensible men frequently do absurd things. Once the idea had entered his head, Bruce could not get rid of it. He, too, was a good deal older than his wife; and he, too, had been undemonstrative in his manner towards her. His girls had made themselves very disagreeable to her—or, at any rate, Harry had;—and he had allowed her to go out a great deal in London by herself. He had thought of her merely as Harry's chaperon: but now it suddenly occurred to him that she was a very young, and very pretty woman herself, though she comported herself as staidly as any old dowager—and indeed he made her see that he fully expected her to do so, and

would have been furiously angry and aggrieved had she attempted to play any *rôle* save that of an *old* married woman. Certainly he need not fear to trust *her*, he thought; *she* was as steady as a rock.

Yet surely she deserved some praise for her discretion. Certainly she had been very wrong to accuse him of marrying her to make a bond slave of her; but on the whole she was a very praiseworthy young woman, and perhaps he had expected too much from her, and given too little in return. She had behaved very sweetly to Harry, and was in every respect a model wife. It would have been insufferable to him to have had a fast, flirting wife, like some of the young matrons of the day; and Constance gave him no anxiety in that way. Yet for all her prudence she was very young, and must be subject to some of the weaknesses of youth; and one of the weaknesses of youth was a foolish craving for love and affection. Poor little thing, he thought, half regretfully; perhaps she had been right when she said he ought to have married an older woman. An older woman would have suited his requirements much better in many respects; yet on

the whole he thought he would not like any other woman for his wife so well as poor Constance.

Moncrieffe had been reading in the back drawing-room, the window of which was standing open. In the distance he could hear the merry voices of his children, who were playing lawn tennis with Netta Day and her brother; for the Days had returned to Brighton, and were daily visitors at the Fortescues' house. Presently they ceased playing, and came strolling slowly past the window, Netta and Julia arm-in-arm, and Mr Day hanging devotedly over Julia on the other side, for his sisters assured him that Harry's affections were already engaged by a young baronet; and, besides, Julia was in greater favour with her rich aunt, Mrs M'Mickie. So, though he liked Harry the best, he devoted himself to Julia, like a prudent young man as he was, and during the last four weeks he flattered himself that he had made considerable progress in her favour.

"There comes Harry," Moncrieffe heard Julia say. "Well, Harry, any letters for me?"

Harry had quitted her sister and friends to run round and get the letters from the postman, who was passing on his afternoon rounds.

"No, there's only one for papa from Constance," replied Harry.

"Hum; she's taken her time about writing," laughed Julia disagreeably. "That's the second letter papa has had from her all the time he's been here."

"Not a very devoted couple apparently," laughed Netta Day.

"No, thank goodness," responded Julia fervently.

They moved away, and Moncrieffe heard no more; but the few words he had caught were sufficient to open his eyes to the fact that Julia hated her step-mother quite as intensely, if not more so, than Harry did. Julia, whom he had always believed to be the essence of sweetness and docility. Was it possible that he had really been deceived in her? Had she too conspired to make Constance's life unhappy? He was deeply shocked and grieved, and began to wonder in what way Julia had sought to annoy her step-mother; for he was sure, from the spiteful tone of her voice, that she must

have done so in some way. In the book he had just been reading, the husband never knew of half the petty torments which his unfortunate wife had suffered at the hands of his mother and sisters; and might not this be the case with Constance and his girls? His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Julia herself, who bounded up to him and gave him Constance's letter, at the same time imprinting a soft kiss on his forehead.

Eagerly he opened the letter, which was short, and written in a light, indifferent style, as if Constance had quite forgotten that there had ever been anything disagreeable between them. She had arranged to move into Moncrieffe Castle to-morrow, she said, and had put off answering his letter, as she thought he would not care to hear from her till she could give him a final account of her movements, and it was only yesterday that she had settled her plans. The whole tone of the letter was easy and unconcerned, and she made no comment upon her husband's prolonged stay at Brighton, taking it apparently as the most natural thing in the world.

It was now a full week since Bruce had

written his last letter to her, and he had daily been expecting an answer, and wondering that none came. Old General Fortescue had asked him blandly one day how Mrs Moncrieffe was, and he had felt rather awkward as he replied that he had not heard from her for three weeks. The words came out of themselves; but when he saw his daughters and the Misses Fortescue exchange smiling glances, he saw the full significance of his admission.

And now she told him she had "put off writing" until she could give him a *final* account of her movements. In other words, she had waited to make one letter do the work of two. Many wives would have written two or three times in the course of a week; but Constance had not answered his letter at the beginning of the week because she feared that would necessitate her writing again at the close. Was she sincere in saying that she thought he would not care to hear from her sooner? Did she really think him so utterly indifferent? It was true that he *had* been indifferent, until General Fortescue's ill-timed question at lunch yesterday; but since then his pride had become concerned, and he began

to perceive that things could surely not be quite what they should between him and his wife.

"What does Constance say, papa, darling?" asked Julia softly, slipping her arm through her father's, and trying to read the letter over his shoulder.

He crushed it quickly up in his hand, however, and put it in his pocket.

"Not much, except that she is going to the castle to-day," he replied, gravely.

"No; her letter does not seem long. Is she still as cross as she was?" asked the girl artlessly.

"Cross?"

"Yes; she was dreadfully cross that day left London. I hardly dared to speak to her replied Julia quietly. "And I fancied must be cross still, because she

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"Cross?"

"Yes; she was dreadfully cross that day we left London. I hardly dared to speak to her," replied Julia quietly. "And I fancied she must be cross still, because she has never written to Harry or me."

"Did you ever write to her?"

"Oh no; of course not. It was her place to write to us, if she wished to correspond."

"Probably she fancied you would not appreciate her letters."

To this Julia returned no reply, but asked

if Constance sent any message to her or Harry.

"No, she does not. Did you expect any?"

"I think it is time to dress for dinner," said Julia, and flitted lightly away.

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"No; her letter does not seem long. Is she still as cross as she was?" asked the girl artlessly.

"Cross?"

"Yes; she was dreadfully cross that day we left London. I hardly dared to speak to her," replied Julia quietly. "And I fancied she must be cross still, because she has never written to Harry or me."

"Did you ever write to her?"

"Oh no; of course not. It was her place to write to us, if she wished to correspond."

"Probably she fancied you would not appreciate her letters."

To this Julia returned no reply, but asked

if Constance sent any message to her or Harry.

"No, she does not. Did you expect any?"

"I think it is time to dress for dinner," said Julia, and flitted lightly away.

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CHAPTER XII.

ELEMENTS OF WAR.

THE ten days which preceded the arrival of Bruce and his daughters at Moncrieffe Castle were very happy ones to his wife and cousin, and Pearl de Vere. The weather, which had cleared up with Sir Eldred's arrival at Drum, continued fine and warm; and this doubtless had a great effect upon the spirits of the little party. The De Vere boys had prophesied that Pearl would "find it jolly dull up at the castle;" but never had she enjoyed any visit so much in her life before. It was a delight to her to explore every nook and corner of the castle and grounds, and to think that all this belonged to dear Constance. In her inno-

cence she fancied that her sister must be the happiest of mortals; and certainly Constance looked very well and bright at this time. Indoors, Pearl stood rather in awe of Mrs Dean, who had caught her "foraging" about the house once or twice, and turned her back with bare civility. Indeed, on one occasion when the housekeeper found the girl examining some books in Harry's bedroom, she had informed her insolently that "Miss Moncrieffe did not like her things meddled with," and turning her out of the room, locked the door and put the key in her pocket. Pearl flew to Constance with the tale, and the latter reprimanded Mrs Dean sharply for her impertinence to her sister. The woman listened to all her mistress said in respectful but obstinate silence. She had too much sense to be uncivil to Mrs Moncrieffe, whatever she might be to a young thing like Pearl. But, after listening to all Constance had to say, she replied firmly that it was quite true Miss Moncrieffe objected to anyone's meddling with her things, and that she (Mrs Dean) considered herself bound to serve her own young ladies before a stranger.

"That is no reason why you should be im-

pertinent to my sister," replied Constance sternly. "This sort of thing must not occur again. Go and unlock Miss Harriet's door at once."

Mrs Dean retired in silence, fuming inwardly at the commanding tone which her young mistress assumed towards her. For years she had been entirely her own mistress, and the mistress of Moncrieffe Castle as well; and she was accustomed to be much made of by the Moncrieffe girls and Mrs Fortescue, her old mistress. Her pride was wounded as well as her temper, therefore, by Constance's tone, though she had drawn the reprimand entirely upon herself by her own conduct.

Constance found that the door of Harry's room was *not* unlocked, in compliance with her orders; but she affected not to notice this, since it is needless to say that neither she nor Pearl cared to enter the room again. This was only one of a series of petty annoyances to which she was subjected by her housekeeper's ill-will. If she suggested any trifling alteration in the arrangement of the house, Mrs Dean at once found a hundred

good reasons against it, though she was careful to give the lady no just cause for dismissing her. Constance knew how highly Bruce valued the woman, and that both the girls were very fond of her, and she felt that she could not possibly venture to dismiss her without some strong reason; and Mrs Dean knew this, and was careful not to supply the reason.

Still, on the whole, those ten days were very pleasant ones to Constance. Every day she either drove over to see her mother, or had the latter and the boys to lunch or dine with her. She had reinstated herself in her brothers' good graces by presenting them with the presents she had purchased for them abroad or in London, and they were constantly dropping in at the castle together or singly. This was all very pleasant in the meantime; but Constance felt that a change must come when Moncrieffe and his daughters came down. In the meantime, however, she made the lads welcome whenever they chose to come, and allowed them to feast on the gooseberries in the garden, regardless of the head gardener's disgust.

Harry and Julia's riding horses had come down with the others, and Sir Eldred insisted on taking Pearl out on one or other of them every day. He pooh-poohed Constance's objections, and turned her scruples into good-natured ridicule, and she found herself unable to withstand his arguments and Pearl's eager entreaties.

Pearl had learned to ride well as a child, and had kept up the habit at Malvern with her cousins; but her habit was the one flaw in her delight at the prospect of riding with Sir Eldred. It was an antiquated garment, which had originally belonged to her mother, and though the body fitted her well enough, the skirt was at once uncomfortable, and (to our modern ideas) utterly absurd. Constance surmounted this difficulty, however, by lending her sister her own new skirt (which was fortunately the same colour as the antique habit), together with her hat, and thus equipped, Pearl felt herself fit to ride with Sir Eldred. Every day they went out together, and the young man coaxed the head forester to erect some hurdles in the park, and gave the girl lessons in jumping. Constance used to sit

and watch them in the distance, and often her mother would join her, and view with placid enjoyment her daughter's feats of horsemanship.

The day on which Moncrieffe and his girls were to arrive dawned fair and sunny as any of the preceding ones; yet Constance arose in the morning with a strange weight at her heart, and a feeling that her brief holiday was at an end. She had a strong suspicion that Pearl would not be able to stay long in the house with Harry and Julia; and she knew that with their arrival would begin a series of petty worries and vexations for herself. And, above all, the delightful sense of freedom in which she had lately been revelling would be entirely gone. She would feel once more that she was in the enemy's camp—a captive! yet accused of being a tyrant and an oppressor!

After breakfast, she went out into the grounds, and seated herself on a rustic bench, where she was soon joined by Pearl and Sir Eldred. They sat talking idly for more than two hours, when Sir Eldred chanced to look at his watch, and startled the others by ob-

serving that it was almost time for the travellers to be arriving.

"Shall we walk down the park and meet them?" he suggested.

"Oh, it isn't worth while!" replied Constance hastily. "The trains are always late, and we should have to wait at the lodge."

Even as she spoke, however, she caught sight of three figures walking briskly across the park; but as they were not coming along the carriage drive, down which Pearl and Sir Eldred were gazing, these two did not observe them so soon, and Constance held her peace, and pretended to watch the drive also. Yet she was painfully conscious of the rapid progress of the three figures across the grass, and as they drew nearer and nearer she felt herself grow pale, and it was with difficulty that she continued to draw her breath.

At last Pearl looked round, and cried out, "They are here!" and Constance rose mechanically and advanced with the other two to meet the new comers.

How grave and *dark* Bruce looked, she thought, as she advanced towards him. What a cold, handsome block of marble he was!

How had she ever had the courage to marry him? and how had she managed to live ten months with him, without having every feeling frozen out of her?

Such were her thoughts as she looked into his face, and forced herself to smile a welcome; and he, on the contrary, was reflecting how much prettier his wife was than he had ever supposed before. This was partly owing to the fresh country air, which had restored her health and consequently her looks, and partly also to the fact of his not having seen her lately. A pretty face, seen every day, does not strike us with the vivid admiration it does strangers, whereas after a few weeks' absence its loveliness flashes upon us fresh and clearly again. And so it was with Bruce, now that he again beheld his wife. He kissed her quietly but very kindly, and she smiled brightly, if rather vaguely, and turned hastily away to introduce her step-daughters to Pearl. They were explaining to Sir Eldred how they had got out of the carriage at the foot of the last hill, and taken a short cut through the park, thus taking him and his companions by surprise; and they merely bowed stiffly to

Pearl as the introduction was made. Then, after a moment's hesitation, Julia shook hands with her, but no further notice did she bestow upon her.

Moncrieffe led the way back to the house, with his wife and Julia on either side of him, and Sir Eldred followed between Harry and Pearl. The former was angry and alarmed to perceive that Sir Eldred did not seem as delighted as he ought to have been at meeting her again. He professed himself pleased to see her again, but not more pleased to see her than Julia; and some instinct told her that he was not really so pleased as he tried to appear. And why was this? She was certain he had come to Drum in order to win an invitation to Moncrieffe, and of course he could have no reason for wishing to be here save to be with her. What had changed him then since his arrival in Scotland? The answer seemed plain enough; he had been constantly with Mrs Moncrieffe since then, and she had made mischief.

Well, it remained to be seen whether her machinations would be eventually successful. Harry resolved not to yield tamely; and she

proceeded to make herself as pleasant as she could to Sir Eldred, talking of things and persons of which Pearl knew nothing, so as to exclude her from the conversation. Once or twice Sir Eldred made a gallant effort to draw her into it, but each time he was unsuccessful, partly because Pearl was too shy to speak when she saw Miss Moncrieffe did not wish her to do so, and partly because Harry instantly changed the talk back to the original groove.

She was not jealous of Pearl, pretty though the latter undoubtedly was.

She was a stylish London belle herself, and what need had she to be jealous of a little shy country girl like this? A girl without a word to say for herself evidently!

But as she was removing her hat and jacket in her own room Julia came in, and began, seating herself on the edge of the bed,—

"Well, what do you think of Constance's sister?"

"She's very pretty," replied Harry carelessly.

"I suppose she is, in her own style," said Julia, compressing her lips into a straight,

pale line. "*I* don't admire her, but I dare-say a good many people would do so. Sir Eldred evidently does."

"Eldred?"

"Yes; you don't suppose Constance has had him boxed up here with her sister all this time for nothing, do you?"

"What do you mean?" inquired Harry haughtily.

"I mean that Constance has been doing her best to catch him for Pearl. I could see that with half an eye. You'll have to look out pretty sharp, my dear, if you don't want to lose him."

"Nonsense!" responded the elder sister sharply. "How do you know? You have only seen them together a few minutes."

"Well, you will see," laughed Julia as she slipped off the bed, and danced out of the room, leaving Harry hot and angry, yet with a chill dread at her heart that her sister's words might after all be true.

She went down to luncheon in no very amiable frame of mind, and snubbed Pearl, who sat next her, most unmercifully whenever she attempted to address her; nor was she much

mollified to perceive that Sir Eldred looked vexed when Pearl was "set down," and sought to draw her back into the conversation.

After luncheon, when Moncreiffe walked off to see his bailiff, Sir Eldred foresaw that things would become more unpleasant among the ladies. He was determined not to let Constance be worried if he could help it, so stationed himself beside her and Pearl in the drawing-room, and read aloud to them as they worked, knowing that his presence would be a restraint on the belligerent powers. Julia had insisted on accompanying her father (rather to his annoyance), but Harry sat in the drawing-room, keenly watching Sir Eldred's manner to Pearl. There was nothing lover-like in it, as far as she could see; but neither did he pay much attention to herself, and this was a sufficient vexation in itself.

The little party had not been long settled thus when it was disturbed by the entrance of Frank and Fred de Vere. They had been out together on a ramble in the woods, and with one of those happy inspirations peculiar to the ingenious mind of youth, they had conceived the idea of coming on to the castle to see what

Constance's step-daughters were like, happily oblivious of the fact that their clothes were dusty, and stained with damp moss; their hair tossed; and their boots muddy.

Constance introduced them to Harry with a careless "my brothers, Harry;" and the young lady bowed coldly, without even looking at the lads, who felt themselves snubbed, though they hardly knew how, and subsided into seats beside their sisters in silence.

"Well, have you been doing any more riding to-day?" asked Frank, turning to Pearl as a person whom it was safe for a fellow to address.

"No," replied the girl regretfully.

"You won't be able to ride so often now the others have come home," said Fred. "The girls will want to ride their horses themselves."

"Whose horses?" asked Harry from the other end of the room. It would be quite too bad, she thought, if Constance had used *her* horse as a means of throwing Pearl and Sir Eldred together; for, of course, Sir Eldred must have accompanied the girl on her rides.

"Yours and your sister's," explained Fred readily. "Pearl used to ride with Sir Eldred every day, you know. They had hurdles put up in the park, and used to jump. I think Pearl liked your horse the best—you're Harry, aren't you?" he added, affably.

"I beg your pardon; except to my own relations, and a few very intimate friends, I am Miss Moncrieffe," replied Harry crushingly.

For a minute or two there was an awkward silence, and then Harry, feeling that she had made herself appear ill-natured in Sir Eldred's eyes, rose and marched majestically out of the room.

"My eye! hasn't she got a temper of her own?" ejaculated Fred, drawing a breath of relief as the door closed upon her. "I suppose she meant to inform me that I was to call her Miss Moncrieffe for the future."

"I should think her meaning was plain enough, you duffer!" remarked Frank grimly.

"Duffer yourself!" retorted Fred indignantly. "You must have a jolly time of

it with her, Constance. Is the other the same sort of thing?"

Here the entrance of Moncrieffe and Julia checked Fred's flow of questions. Moncrieffe shook hands kindly with his young brothers-in-law, and Julia also extended her dainty little hand to them, though she made no effort to speak to them.

"Did you see our hurdles in the park?" asked Sir Edward coolly.

"I did," replied Moncrieffe quietly.

"I've been teaching Miss Pearl to jump," proceeded the baronet languidly. "Didn't jump myself, you know — too much exertion for me; but Miss Pearl got on capitally. We'd sad work with your wife at first—wouldn't hear of our using your girls' horses —said she was sure we'd lame 'em, or break their backs, or put their eyes out, or something; so I just ordered them round 'without the leave o' she,' and when she saw us return in safety from our first ride, she grew easier in her mind."

"Do the horses good to be exercised," said Bruce.

But there was a slight constraint in his tone

which Constance instantly perceived with uneasiness. Was he vexed with her and his cousin about the riding, and for having had those hurdles put up?

The fact was that Julia had been confiding to him her suspicions about Pearl, and he was wondering anxiously whether there could be any truth in them. He did not believe that Constance would deliberately try to entrap Sir Eldred into an engagement with her sister—indeed he was very vexed with Julia for suggesting as much; but he thought it quite possible that his cousin might have transferred his affections from Harry to Pearl without Constance's knowledge or sanction. If so, he would be sorry (and, doubtless, a little offended also); but after all Eldred was no great match, and a handsome girl like Harry ought to do better.

"Constance wouldn't give *us* a mount," observed Fred, in an injured tone.

"Wouldn't she?" asked Moncrieffe.

"No; she said we'd spoil the horses. As if we didn't know how to ride ten times better than Pearl there. Why, Frank and I used to go and stay with the Prescots nearly every

Christmas for the hunting. That was *real* jumping, I can tell you. Rather different to hopping over a couple of neat hurdles on a lawn."

"Well, you must come and ride with your sister sometimes," said Moncrieffe, smiling.

"All right," acquiesced Fred cheerfully. "I told you he wouldn't mind Constance" (triumphantly). "When shall we come?"

"You can have a couple of horses to-morrow if you like," laughed Bruce.

"Really, Bruce, you should not yield to all his demands like that," said Constance, with a nervous laugh. "He is growing bumptious, and requires repressing."

For which speech she received a furious scowl from Fred, who muttered something beginning with "shabby" beneath his breath.

"After all, Bruce is rather a jolly old brick," observed Fred, as he and Frank were trudging homewards.

"You might have had more sense of decency than to ask him for his horses like that," replied Frank, who was two years older,

and not altogether devoid of pride and tact.

"Rot!" cried Fred vulgarly. "I got what I wanted anyway, and didn't vex him either. But I call it very dirty of Con to try and set him against lending us the horses."

CHAPTER XIII.

PEARL IS SNUBBED.

ALMOST before breakfast was over at Moncrieffe Castle the following morning, Fred and Charlie presented themselves to claim their promised ride — Frank having refused to come, and resigned his place to Charlie.

Moncrieffe received them good-naturedly, and sent them down to the stable to get the horses. He was rather amused by them, and wished besides to please Constance; though, as it happened, she was more annoyed with her brothers for their pertness, than grateful to her husband for his good-nature to them.

After dismissing the lads in high glee, Moncrieffe retired to his study to write, but was soon interrupted by Julia, who came in with a cloud on her fair face, and an ominous glitter in her blue eyes.

"Papa," she began, trying to speak softly, "I came to tell you that Harry and I would rather no one rode our horses but ourselves. It seems that Pearl de Vere has been riding them turn about all this last week, and I think it was very impertinent of her—and very impertinent of Eldred to have those hurdles put up without your leave too."

"I do not think so," replied her father coldly.

"Well at any rate you won't let Pearl ride our horses any more, will you?"

"The horses are mine, not yours, Julia. Whenever you wish to ride yourself, you have the first right to them, of course; but when you do not want them, they are quite at the service of Pearl or any other lady guest of mine."

Moncrieffe spoke quietly, and without raising his eyes to his daughter, or he would have been shocked by the sudden gleam of fury which shot from her pale eyes. She knew from his tone that it would be worse than useless to argue with him, and at that minute she almost hated him. Without another word she turned and walked demurely out of the room, vowing vengeance against Pearl in her heart. In the hall she encountered Harry, who was swinging a racket disconsolately to and fro, being unable to find Sir Eldred, though she had told him at breakfast she was going to practise tennis this morning. Surely, if he cared for her company, he would have been on the look out to play with her; but he was nowhere to be found, though she had hunted everywhere for him.

Julia's account of the interview with her father (exaggerated and highly coloured as it was) did not tend to smoothe her ruffled plumes, and she indulged in some very bad wishes regarding her step-mother and Pearl.

"Come along and let us practise our tennis by ourselves, since we can't get anyone else to join us," she said at last, and they went out together, pretending not to see Pearl, who was coming downstairs at this minute in her hat.

She had overheard Harry's last remark, however, and thinking they wanted someone to join their game, and being besides very fond of tennis, she took a racket out of the stand in the hall, and followed them to the tennis ground.

"Shall I play with you?" she asked in all good faith of Julia, who had hitherto treated her with perfect civility, if a little coldly.

Julia, who was tightening the ropes of the net, made no response; and Harry, who was in the opposite court, turned and marched off without saying a word.

"Isn't your sister going to play?" asked Pearl innocently.

For all reply Julia tripped lightly after her sister, whom she soon overtook; and passing her arm through hers she strolled away

with her, and they soon disappeared from view.

For a minute poor little Pearl stood gazing after them with tears of mortification and anger in her eyes; then she was roused by hearing a well-known voice calling to her from beneath a weeping ash which grew on a little mound hard by. She readily obeyed the call, and made her way to the tree beneath which Sir Eldred was lying with a novel in one hand, and a small kitten playing with the other. It was a little vagabond which Pearl had found in the woods, and which had followed her home, and been her pet and plaything ever since.

"Ungrateful kitten!" said the baronet, as the little creature sprang towards its mistress. "Have I not coaxed you and flattered you for the last hour? and now you desert me for a younger and a fairer rival! Such is life."

Pearl picked up the kitten and pressed her cheek against it to hide the tears which were still in her eyes.

"Sit down, the ground is as dry as a brick," said the young man, and Pearl obeyed. "That wasn't a very pleasant reception you received from my amiable cousins just now," he remarked, drily.

"What had I done to them that they should treat me like that?" asked the girl, with a half sob.

She looked so pretty in her distress, with her blue eyes flashing through her tears, and her lips pouting tremulously, that Sir Eldred felt tempted to adopt a warmer form of consolation, and kiss the tears away. He resisted the impulse heroically, however, and replied with quiet kindness,—

"Don't mind them, child; they are two ill-natured girls, not worth one of your tears. For the future I advise you to avoid them as much as you can. They will only be rude to you if you seek their society."

"Indeed, I am not likely to do that," cried Pearl indignantly.

"Which do you like the best?"

"I don't like either of them; but Julia is certainly the nicer of the two."

"Indeed she is not. She sets Harry on to say and do disagreeable things, instead of saying and doing them herself—finds it a safer method of venting her displeasure, you know. I used to think Harry a fine girl at one time, but I am beginning to lose all patience with her. She ought to have learnt to do your sister justice by this time."

"Doesn't she like Constance?"

Sir Eldred saw he had made a mistake, and returned an evasive answer; but Pearl was not to be put off so easily.

"Do tell me, *please*, Sir Eldred," she pleaded, bending forward, and fixing her eyes beseechingly on his face. "Do those girls dislike Constance?"

"I'm afraid they don't like her very much, Pearl," he replied, gravely.

"How *can* they dislike her?" said the girl wonderingly. "She is so good, and so beautiful. Don't *you* think so?"

"Yes, I do," he replied, slowly, but in a tone which fully satisfied Pearl as to his sincerity.

"I don't think there is anyone in all the world half so good as Constance," she continued, earnestly. "Or half so beautiful either," she added, warmly.

"Don't you?" he asked, regarding her with a kindly smile. "Well, I think I almost agree with you; and I've seen rather more of the world than you have."

"Do—do they make her *unhappy?*" asked Pearl anxiously, and dropping her voice almost to a whisper as she pronounced the last awful word.

"Well, she's had a good deal to put up with from them certainly; but don't worry your head about it child; they will probably marry soon, and leave home."

"I wish someone would marry them at once," cried Pearl vehemently.

"I would offer my services if I wasn't afraid of being taken up for bigamy by an interfer-

ing magistracy. No, don't look offended, Pearl; I didn't mean to make light of your trouble, child. But I want you not to think more of it than it deserves. See, there go the amiable sisters, riding across the park. That is to prevent us riding their horses, I shrewdly suspect."

"Not much fear of *my* doing so again. Julia almost told me she didn't like me to use her horse."

"I can quite imagine her doing so."

"It was this morning, before breakfast, she said to me, 'So you have been riding a good deal, I hear. Pray, was it my horse or my sister's that you made use of?' 'I made use of both,' I said. 'How very sensible of you to make what use you pleased of them, without waiting to ask us,' she said, with a disagreeable smile, which showed she did not mean what she said; 'it is true Harry and I do not much like our horses being ridden by anyone but ourselves; but of course *you* were welcome to make what use you liked of them.

I am so glad you helped yourself to them without minding us.' Only I can't tell you the tone she said it in."

"Ah! she's a sweet creature is our Julia," sighed Sir Eldred, shaking his head gravely. "She has such a pleasant way of saying such dashed unpleasant things. But, I say, Constance is all by herself indoors. Suppose we invite her out here."

"I'll go and fetch her," cried Pearl, springing up and darting away before Sir Eldred had raised his head from his hand on which it was leaning.

By-and-by she returned with her sister, and the three sat happily under the drooping branches of the ash, almost believing that no Moncrieffe, Harry, or Julia had come to spoil the happy, lazy existence they had been leading during the ten previous days. But presently a big dog bounded in upon them, greatly to the irritation of Pearl's kitten, and then Bruce himself appeared, attracted to the ash by the sound of voices beneath.

It was a pretty picture upon which he gazed—the three handsome young people grouped picturesquely on the ground, with his big black-and-tan collie crouching beside Constance, and watching with visible contempt the evolutions of the kitten, which was swinging itself to and fro in Sir Eldred's inverted billycock, which had fallen from his head on to the grass. Pearl was laughing merrily at its tricks, and Sir Eldred was professing great alarm respecting the safety of his hat.

Bruce seated himself beside his wife, and endeavoured to join in their talk; but somehow the conversation soon branched off into a discussion between him and Sir Eldred respecting the prospects of the shooting this year, leaving the ladies out in the cold. It was not his fault, poor Bruce; he meant to be pleasant and genial; but somehow fun and nonsense did not flourish in his presence, and in the present instance they died a natural death the instant he appeared.

He did not seem to perceive this, however, but continued to talk on, absorbed in his subject, till at length Constance rose quietly to return to the house, when he insisted on accompanying her, saying that he had to change his boots before luncheon.

Neither Sir Eldred nor Pearl deeming it necessary to accompany the others indoors, they remained alone together beneath the ash.

The day was growing hotter, and there was something drowsy in the air. Sir Eldred lay back with his arms folded beneath his head, and his half-closed eyes straying upwards through the green branches to the blue sky above.

Pearl leant against the stem of the tree, and turned over the pages of the novel he had been reading. A desultory sort of converation was carried on between them, interspersed by long, dreamy pauses; until at last Sir Eldred was roused to active exertion by a huge bumble which persisted in alighting on his nose.

"Confound the brute!" he cried at last, sitting upright, and making a fruitless dash at the bee, which immediately disappeared through the branches.

"And look at the kitten," cried Pearl, raising her eyes from the book, and perceiving for the first time that the small mischief was busily tearing out the lining of Sir Eldred's hat. "You wicked monkey!" she cried, emptying it out of the hat, which she placed on her own head. "How does it suit me?" she asked, archly.

"So charmingly that I would fain try a similar experiment with your hat," he replied, taking her little white hat from her lap and placing it gravely on his own head, with the elastic under his chin, military fashion. "How do I look," he asked, anxiously.

For all answer she went into peals of merriment.

"Oh dear! I wish you could see yourself," she said.

"From your tone, I strongly suspect it is as

well I cannot. Try a cigar," he added, offering her one he had just lighted.

"No, thank you," she replied, shaking her head.

"Don't you approve of ladies smoking?"

"No; but it isn't only that—I am afraid I shouldn't like it."

"Well, I don't approve of ladies smoking either, as a rule; but try a whiff, just to see what it's like."

Still she shook her head, laughing, and he took her hand and tried to press the cigar into it.

It was at this precise moment that the branches were pushed roughly aside, and Harry stood before them. She saw them with their hands clasped together, and with each other's hats on their heads; and although Pearl hastily released her hand from Sir Eldred's, she still retained her hold of the cigar, which, in her alarm at Harry's sudden appearance and wrathful look, she had grasped with unconscious tightness.

"Dear me, what a romantic picture!" exclaimed Harry, with an offensive laugh. "I am really sorry to disturb you, but Mrs M'Mickie is here, and wishes to see Pearl, of whom she has heard great accounts from my father. Papa thinks you the perfection of maidenliness and modesty, you know; and is always advising Julia and me to copy your manners. It is fortunate he can't see you now, or he might change his opinion about your modesty."

"For shame, Harry!" thundered Sir Eldred, starting to his feet.

She laughed insultingly in his face, and walked away without further words, too dizzied by the jealousy with which her brain was whirling, to know exactly what she had said, but feeling with desperate certainty that she had ruined herself with Eldred for ever.

Pearl had sat quite still and passive while her rival was speaking, but now she rose pale and trembling, and with a scared look in her blue eyes, which were darkened and dilated

by excitement. To a young, sensitive girl, the charge of immodesty, however undeserved, must be inexpressibly painful, and Sir Eldred saw with deep pity the pain and distress on the poor little maiden's face.

"I am really ashamed to own that girl as my cousin," he said, angrily. "Don't look so distressed, dear," he added, with a sudden softening of tone; "no one ever thinks of what Harry says when she is in a temper—she doesn't know what she says at such times."

Pearl did not reply, but she tossed away the cigar, and removing his hat from her small dark head, handed it back to him in silence. He saw that her lips were quivering too much to allow of her speaking, so he restored her own hat to her without a word, and prepared to accompany her back to the house.

"Don't give Harry the satisfaction of seeing that she has vexed you," he said, as they

neared the door. "I daresay she's ashamed of herself by this time."

Though Pearl was silent, he saw with relief that she did not show any disposition to shed tears; indeed her manner was particularly calm, if rather subdued, as she entered the drawing-room.

Here they found the entire party assembled, with Mrs M'Mickie and one of her sisters, and Mr Macdougal. The latter had not come with Mrs M'Mickie, but had walked over by himself to pay his respects to his head parishioner, and his face grew more than usually long when he found Mrs M'Mickie of Drum seated in the drawing-room before him. Harry was making herself very agreeable to him (he could not tell, poor man, how completely she was making fun of him), not because she liked him, but from a wish to annoy Constance, who, she knew, detested him. She was looking flushed and handsome, and laughed and chatted away, determined to let Sir Eldred see that she cared nothing for his displeasure.

In her present mood, she would have made herself charming even to a chimney-sweep, and Mr Macdougal was almost a God-send to her, as she could hardly have chatted so gaily to any of the others as she could to him. She glanced sharply at Pearl as she entered, but though the girl's pale face was whiter than usual, there was no sign of emotion in her manner as she advanced quietly to shake hands with Mrs M'Mickie. The old lady regarded her sternly, but Pearl was not thinking of the impression she produced, and after shaking hands quietly with her, sat down on a chair beside her, without any apparent embarrassment.

"Well, missie, I thought I was never to see you at all. You were out when I called on your mother, and I didn't see you in kirk either of the two last Sabbaths."

"I am very sorry," replied Pearl gently. "I was in my mother's pew both Sundays, and you could not see us where you sat."

"Humph!" said Mrs M'Mickie, jerking

back her head. "By-the-bye, I didn't see *you* in kirk either last Sabbath, Mrs Moncrieffe. Maybe you were in your mother's sitting too?"

"I had a headache, and could not go last Sunday," replied Constance; "so Pearl and Sir Eldred went to mother's pew."

"I'm glad to hear he goes to kirk occasionally," sniffed the old lady, nodding grimly at her nephew. "I suspect he don't often go when he's got no ladies to take him."

"My dear aunt, I assure you my piety in this respect is a byword among my friends and companions," protested Sir Eldred gravely.

"Then they must be a mighty bad lot, that's all I can say, if they take you as their model," retorted the amiable aunt. "You didn't lose much in not hearing Mr Macdougal's discourse last Sabbath forenoon, for a greater pack of rubbishing nonsense I never heard in my life," she continued to Constance. "I hope you mean to give us something a bit better next Sabbath, Mr Macdougal, sir."

Mr Macdougal grew red, and fidgeted on his chair—one of those folding, wicker *prie-dieux*, which Harry had selected for him in hopes that he would capsize it. At present he seemed likely enough to do so, and she watched him with malicious delight as he wriggled ever nearer the edge of his seat.

"Oh!" she said, significantly, "of course Mr Macdougal will preach well next Sunday —Constance will be there."

She knew that the minister was a devoted admirer of her step-mother's, and that nothing would annoy the latter more than any notice being taken of the fact.

"Yes," added Mr Macdougal, simpering, "I lacked inspiration last Sabbath."

He blushed fiery red as he brought this out, and wriggling to the extreme verge of his seat, the *prie-dieu* suddenly collapsed, and deposited him on the carpet, the back closing over him.

Even Mrs M'Mickie indulged in a grim smile, and as for Harry she fairly shouted

with mirth. The unhappy minister gathered himself up from the floor, and seemed about to fly, when Harry interposed to prevent his departure, and insisted on his staying to lunch. Moncrieffe frowned heavily at this impertinence on Harry's part—did she forget that Constance was mistress here? No, she remembered the fact well enough, and was only too glad of this opportunity of showing her disregard of her step-mother's authority. So she continued to press her invitation upon the unhappy Mr Macdougal, who was too confused to resist her, and subsided on to another seat near her — not the *prie-dieu*, it need hardly be stated.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHARLIE'S LITTLE JOKE.

ON returning from their ride, it occurred to Fred and Charlie de Vere that, as they were very hungry, it would be much pleasanter to stay and lunch at the castle than walk two miles back to Dunfern Cottage.

"The grub here's always first-rate," remarked Charlie.

"And we can have some tennis afterwards," added Fred.

So they strolled up to the castle, and bent their steps towards a short flight of stone

steps which led up to a flower-decked balcony outside the drawing-room windows.

"I say, just listen to that," whispered Fred, as they began to ascend the steps, and from the open window above they distinguished the voice of Mrs M'Mickie apostrophising someone.

"I heard a deal about your being such a virtuous young person, and so sensible and quiet; but I have long discovered that people in general have a very low standard in such-like things. If a young woman isn't down-right fast, she's called an angel forsooth. Eldred, there, has been singing your praises to me; yet, I dare say, you never read a tract in your life."

"No, I have not," replied Pearl's voice.

She was too unhappy just now to mind what Mrs M'Mickie was saying to her, and spoke in a quiet, subdued manner, which won Mrs M'Mickie's approval. The shrewd old lady saw that the girl was neither laughing at her nor fawning upon her, and her quiet

manner pleased her. (Oh, could she but have seen her in Sir Eldred's hat, and with a cigar in her hand!)

"Here are some tracts that it may advantage you to read," she proceeded. "I shall question you upon them, so mind you read them."

"Old cat!" whispered Charlie outside.

He and Fred were on the balcony by this time, and through the low open window they could see a high-backed arm-chair, over which hung Pearl's blue shawl.

"I say, let's give Pearl a fright," whispered Charlie. He crept along the balcony on his hands and knees till he reached the window close to which the large arm-chair was standing. Crawling stealthily up to it, he reared himself suddenly upright, with a loud "Boo!" to find himself confronted, not by Pearl, but by Mrs M'Mickie!

She had been unfolding the tracts in silence, and she gave a violent start at the sudden apparition at her elbow; but instantly recov-

ering herself, she seized the stupified lad (who had remained blankly staring at her) by his hair, and proceeded to thump him soundly on the ear with her clenched fist.

"You godless, wicked, abominable young child of Satan!" she panted, between the blows, from which Charlie, who was only thirteen, and small for his age, was unable to defend himself. He grasped tight hold of the old lady's legs, however, and would have upset her, had Moncrieffe not hastened to the rescue and separated the combatants.

Harry did not attempt to hide her laughter; but Julia hastened forward with pretty concern to inquire whether "that horrid boy" had hurt her "dear Aunt M'Mickie."

Dear Aunt M'Mickie vouchsafed no answer, save a growl, and marched straight for the door.

"You need not expect me to set foot inside your door again, Bruce Moncrieffe, so long as you keep such leaven of mischief in your house," she observed, angrily. "Oh, yes,

you may laugh!" (to Harry). "It seems that I am to meet nothing but insult here!"

"Dear aunt! don't go like that," pleaded Julia, almost in tears.

But Mrs M'Mickie was half-way downstairs, with her sister Jane following tremblingly after her.

Moncrieffe escorted her to the door, as in duty bound, but she declined to look at or speak to him, and he returned to the drawing-room looking very grave. It was not the quarrel with Mrs M'Mickie that annoyed him so much as the conduct of his own daughters. Something must have gone wrong with Harry to-day, he thought, for there was a restless defiance in her manner which he had never seen there before. But he was most deeply grieved to note the anxiety which Julia had displayed to propitiate her rich aunt. As her father, he might consider it his duty not to offend the old lady unnecessarily; but it was not pleasant to see a young girl so eager where money was concerned.

When he entered the drawing-room, they all thought he looked grave because he was angry with his brothers-in-law; and the lads, giving up all hope of luncheon, hastened to take their leave in a very crestfallen manner. The gong sounded as they were leaving the room, and the rest of the party went downstairs, all looking more or less serious, except Harry, who laughed and talked enough for them all.

For once in her life Constance was almost unkind, and declined coldly to take any notice of Mr Macdougal. Since Harry had invited him she might take all the trouble of entertaining him, she decided; and as the minister stayed on for two good hours after luncheon was over, and as none of the others would be troubled to talk to him, Miss Moncrieffe found her hands pretty full, and began to regret having insisted on keeping him to luncheon.

"Papa," said Julia, after luncheon, as they were standing together at the hall door, "I hope this will put a stop to those horrid De Vere boys' visits here."

"What will?" asked Moncrieffe gravely.

"What happened before luncheon, to be sure. I don't suppose Aunt M'Mickie will come here again."

"Possibly not; but that will not be altogether Charlie's fault. He meant to startle Pearl, not Mrs M'Mickie."

"So he says. But I hope you will discourage their coming here. You had better do so in time, or they will become a perfect pest. They are always over here, Mrs Dean tells me. I'm sure they intended to have luncheon here to-day."

"Dear me, I hope not!" exclaimed Moncrieffe. "And we let them go away just as the gong was sounding. Why didn't Constance make them stay, I wonder?"

"She saw you were looking so vexed with them—"

"I was not," interrupted Moncrieffe sternly.

And without further words he strode off to his wife's boudoir, where he found her seated at her writing-table, with an unfinished note

before her. Sir Eldred stood near her, playing with some flowers in a vase, and looking very grave. Constance was looking grave too, for the young man had just been telling her of Harry and Julia's treatment of Pearl that morning, and she was disposed to send the girl back to her mother, rather than expose her further to such conduct. Sir Eldred, however, had pleaded that Pearl should try and maintain her ground a little longer, and Constance had at last yielded a consent, thinking that it would be pleasant for the girl to be in a large house full of company, if Harry would only treat her with decent civility—a very doubtful point, however.

"I am going over to see your mother to-day, Constance," began Moncrieffe, as he entered; "will you drive me, or shall I walk?"

"Just as you like," replied Constance indifferently. "I don't care."

"Oh, I would just as soon walk," said

Moncrieffe, with a shade of pique in his tone; "only I thought perhaps you would like to see your mother."

"Very well; will you order the carriage then?" she replied, suppressing a sigh, as she saw that to persist in her refusal would offend her husband.

He left the room, as did Sir Eldred, and she proceeded to finish a couple of notes, and then set out in search of Pearl, whom she hoped to induce to accompany her and Bruce on their drive. She encountered Pearl and Sir Eldred on the stairs, in their tennis shoes, and with rackets in their hands.

"Won't you come and see mother, Pearl?" she asked. "Bruce and I are going to drive over."

Pearl's face fell; she would far rather stay and play lawn tennis with Sir Eldred, and she said something to this effect.

"I think you ought to come, Pearl," said Constance, to whom the prospect of a *tête-à-tête*

with her grave, silent husband was decidedly formidable.

"I'd rather not, please," pleaded Pearl, and Constance was giving way with a sigh, when Mr Macdougal hurried up to bid her good-bye, and it occurred to her to offer him a lift as far as Dunfern Cottage. He accepted the offer gratefully, and she went away to dress, relieved to feel that she had got a third person to share the drive one way. Not that she disliked her husband, or found his presence disagreeable; but he was so difficult to talk to, and get on with, that she preferred having a stranger to entertain him.

Bruce said nothing when he found that the minister was to be of their party, but he felt none the less annoyed because Constance had asked him. He guessed her motive tolerably well, and it pained him, though he was too proud to complain, or show that he noticed it. Had he really made himself so disagreeable to her that she shrank from being alone with him? he wondered. Was she frightened of

him because he was grave ? or did she dislike him ? He thought of the days before their marriage, and felt certain she had not disliked him *then ;* and why should she do so now, when he was so much fonder of her ? Was the fault his, or did it lie with her ?

He gave no outward sign of what was stirring in his mind, however, and handed his wife attentively into the carriage, without making any comment ; but she saw by his face (which she had learnt to read by this time) that he was vexed. He took no notice of Mr Macdougal, but left the talking entirely to Constance, who was anything but gracious to the poor minister. She had calculated on his talking to Bruce, and she did not relish having to entertain him herself.

" What a charming young lady Miss Moncrieffe is," began the minister ecstatically.

Already his susceptible but fickle heart had swerved from its allegiance to Mrs Moncrieffe, and succumbed to the fascinations of her step-daughter. Harry's gaiety, malicious though it

was, seemed more charming to him than Mrs Moncrieffe's cold beauty—for the gentleness with which he had formerly accredited the latter seemed to have vanished as far as he was concerned.

A cold bow was the only response to his last speech, and then, feeling that she must say something, Constance remarked that they were having lovely weather, and that she hoped it would continue fine for the shooting.

"It cleared up with your arrival in Scotland, and it is sure to continue fine while you favour us with your presence," replied Mr Macdougal gallantly.

"It rained a good deal during my first week at Drum," rejoined Mrs Moncrieffe coldly.

"But it could not *continue* to rain after you came. Indeed, wherever *you* are, there must be sunshine."

But Constance was gazing steadily the other way, and took no apparent notice of this last impertinence—as she considered it. She saw the minister flush and look uncomfortable,

but she was also aware that a half smile was stirring the corners of Bruce's heavy moustache, and she felt no pity for the former's sufferings.

But here Bruce came to the rescue, and made one or two remarks; and then they reached the corner of the road leading to Dunfern Cottage, and Mr Macdougal was dropped to continue his way on foot.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed your drive, Constance," remarked Bruce, smiling, as they drove on again.

"No, indeed, I did not," she replied. "If I had had any idea how insufferable that man was, I certainly should not have asked him to drive with us."

"You would even have preferred a *tête-à-tête* with *me*," added Moncrieffe.

She glanced quickly up at him, wondering what he meant, but he was looking quite good tempered, and she fancied it must have been a random shot.

"How does Frank shoot?" he asked next.

"Pretty well—I think he would be a good shot with more practice."

"I want to ask him for the twelfth."

"Oh, Bruce, how good of you! It will be a tremendous treat to him."

"Why didn't he come to ride to-day?"

"I expect he was ashamed of the way Fred asked for the ride yesterday."

Bruce laughed, and just then they reached the cottage and alighted.

They found Mrs de Vere and the boys at home; Fred and Charlie looked very much ashamed of themselves after their morning exploit, but Bruce soon set them at their ease, and confirmed them in their opinion that he was a "brick" by his good-nature.

He made himself very agreeable to Mrs de Vere, and enchanted Frank by inviting him to join his shooting party on the twelfth, and was altogether very pleasant and good-natured. On their homeward drive Constance was very sweet to him. She felt that she owed him this much for his good-nature to

the boys, and she acknowledged to herself that he was much pleasanter and kinder than she had imagined—when one got him alone, away from his daughters. Yet all the while she was conscious of a painful feeling of *effort* in being pleasant to him. She could not exactly define the feeling to herself—indeed she did not try to do so; but she felt it there, vague and intangible, yet strong and paralysing; suffocating her ideas, and dragging at her words—impossible either to grapple with or to shake off.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TWELFTH.

THAT same afternoon, Sir Charles and Lady de Vere arrived at Moncrieffe Castle with their son Josh. The latter instantly attached himself to the side of Harry (whose charms had made a deep impression upon him when he dined at the Moncrieffes' in London), and though she treated him with undisguised contempt, she did not altogether drive him from her, for in her present state of resentment against Sir Eldred, she felt it a necessity to have someone else to flirt with. She discovered now that she was not at all in love with her cousin, and

all her previous liking had been transformed into anger and contempt. She felt herself cruelly ill-used; and yet, on looking back, she was honest enough to acknowledge that Sir Eldred had given her no just cause to suppose he cared for her. Yet she had made no secret of her belief that he did. There was the sting! Julia, the Days, and Constance all knew that she fancied herself in love with her cousin, and now she suffered agonies of mortification as she thought how she was humiliated in their eyes. Yet while confessing that she had deceived herself, she was inconsistent enough to fancy that Constance had wronged her by deliberately trying to win Sir Eldred from her, for her own sister. Constance had always opposed the baronet's attentions to Harry (or so Harry supposed), and now she had succeeded in alienating him completely from her. How far Pearl was in the plot, Harry did not pause to consider. She only felt that she was her rival, and hated her accordingly. But it was some consolation to her to feel that

Pearl might also be deceiving herself, for though Sir Eldred evidently preferred her company to that of either Harry or Julia, he paid her no attention that he might not have paid any pleasant young lady into whose company he was constantly thrown.

Well, at anyrate no one should say she was breaking her heart about Sir Eldred, Harry determined; and she was more lively and brilliant than her family had ever seen her before. She received Josh de Vere's devotions graciously therefore, and amused herself and Julia by making merciless fun of him. At dinner, the conversation naturally turned on the coming election at C—, at which Josh was to stand for the Liberal side. Moncrieffe was a strong Conservative, but he was too polite to argue much with his guest, and Sir Charles had things nearly all his own way. He was a handsome old gentleman, with the fair hair and blue eyes of the De Veres, and a thin, erect figure. He was very courteous to ladies, in a formal sort of way; but he was also very

irascible, and his politeness was sorely tried when his wife, a stout, good-natured lady, not over-burdened by sense, remarked, after he had been upholding Liberal views, that she didn't know what they were coming to, with all the revolutionary ideas that were getting about, and the lower classes being educated out of their sphere, and servants growing so independent, and tenants refusing to pay their rents, and all the dear little rabbits and hares being killed, and one thing and another. All this was strung together without any commas or colons, though profusely interlarded with sighs and shakes of the head, and Sir Charles's politeness nearly gave way.

"My dear Louisa," he said, stiffly, "I do not think you quite comprehend the things you are speaking about."

"Oh, yes, I do," said my lady, fanning herself placidly. "I know all about the hares at anyrate. Poor, dear, delightful little things! They actually say there will not be one left in the kingdom—just think of that!"

"Then we sha'n't have any more hare soup," remarked Josh disconsolately.

"That *will* be a national calamity indeed," remarked Harry gravely. "When you are in Parliament, Mr Josh, you must point that fact out to the other members."

"But you forget I'm to be a Liberal," said Josh doubtfully.

"Why not turn Conservative?" suggested Harry insinuatingly.

"Well," hesitated Josh, "I should be sorry never to get jugged hare again."

"Now, now, Josh, my boy, you have joked enough," struck in Sir Charles hurriedly.

"I never joke, sir," returned Josh, with offended dignity, and his mouth full.

"Of course he is not joking," added Harry. "He is going to turn Conservative—aren't you?" with a bewitching glance at Josh, who melted into amorous smiles, and seemed ready to agree to anything she might propose.

"I don't know what we are coming to, with Conservatives and Liberals, and one

thing and another," chorussed Lady de Vere plaintively.

"Then if you don't know, why the devil do you talk, madam?" asked Sir Charles, his temper at last bursting the bonds which his politeness strove to lay upon it.

"For the same reason that you do, my dear," replied his wife, with a large, soft laugh. "Because I like to."

"Don't lose your temper, Sir Charles," laughed Harry maliciously. "I am sure Mr Josh will be an ornament to the House, on whichever side he sits. I should like to hear his maiden speech. I am sure it will be something quite out of the common."

"Oh, my gov promised I should not have to speak at all if I went into Parliament," said Josh anxiously. "I sha'n't, shall I, govy?"

"You aren't in yet, sir," returned his father testily; and just then Constance made the move, and the ladies retired to the drawing-room.

The following morning, Sir Charles carried

his son off on a long ride to see some people on electioneering business, ten miles away. Josh would have much preferred remaining with Harry, but his father was resolute, and he had to accompany him, though sorely against his will.

In the course of the day several other guests arrived at the castle, among whom were two young unmarried men, and several married ones. Here was a fine field for Harry and Julia. The latter, be it observed, was without a governess for the summer, and she made good use of her liberty. All admirers were equally acceptable to her, were they married, or were they single; but she soon perceived, to her intense digust, that she was entirely eclipsed by Harry, Pearl, and even Constance —though the latter did not seek to attract attention. There were also some nice-looking young married women of the party, and altogether Julia felt herself left out in the cold. Not that her father's guests neglected her by any means; but they failed to pay her the

devoted homage which she craved. Harry flirted with everyone all round, and young Mr Brodie and Josh de Vere followed her about like her own shadow. Captain Scott, the other young man, had attached himself to Pearl—and Julia had no special slave! She was very angry, for, though she was only sixteen, and Pearl had turned eighteen, she had hitherto looked down on the quiet country maiden (she was not country-bred really, but Julia looked upon her as such), and was excessively surprised and mortified at being surpassed by her in anything.

The next day was the twelfth, and all the men went up to the moors. Some of the ladies had arranged to take their luncheon up to them, but others, among whom were Lady de Vere and Constance, elected to remain at home. All the young ladies of course were for going to the moor, under the charge of two married ladies, and a very merry party they were as they set off. The Moncrieffe girls, however, lost no opportunity of snub-

bing Pearl, and by the time they reached the luncheon ground, she wished heartily that she had not come at all. None of the sportsmen were in sight when the ladies reached the place of rendezvous, but they proceeded to lay the luncheon, and soon the first batch of shooters (among whom was Josh) made their appearance.

"I say, you know, this is jolly," observed Josh, to whom luncheon was the principal attraction of the day. "You've got everything very nice, Miss Harry; were those gooseberries your idea?"

"No, I'm afraid they were not," she replied.

"We've had capital sport," said Frank de Vere, who was in high spirits. "Josh here has slaughtered exactly one bird."

"Bravo, Josh!" remarked Sir Eldred.

He was watching Captain Scott help Pearl to some pie, and reflecting that she could flirt just as well as other girls when she chose. He did not particularly care about being supplanted (indeed, as he had never flirted with her, he

could hardly call it being supplanted) with her; and merely watched her with a sort of lazy amusement and interest. Yes, she was a nice little thing, he reflected; quite what he should have imagined Constance's sister to be. And how quietly she flirted—so differently to the Moncrieffe girls.

"It must be a great treat to you to get some good shooting like this," remarked Harry to Frank de Vere. "I suppose you have never had much before?"

"Confound her impertinence," thought young De Vere savagely; but he replied frankly that he had not, and consoled himself by emptying Josh's champagne glass.

"I wish you would leave a fellow alone," growled Josh, rising and moving round to the other side of Harry. "I sha'n't come out shooting to-morrow," he remarked. "It takes too much out of a fellow. I felt quite sick before luncheon,—I did really. I had a sort of a sinking—"

"Oh, don't describe your disagreeable

sensations to us," struck in Frank unkindly; and Sir Charles remarked that Josh would have to ride over to C— to-morrow on electioneering business.

Josh groaned.

"I don't want any more riding," he remarked, piteously. "I had such a beastly long ride yesterday, and to-day I'm quite sore."

"Shut up, you duffer," laughed Frank.

"You must go, sir," said Sir Charles irritably; "and you'll have to be up and off by half-past eight."

"You'll have to get up and wake him then," laughed Frank. "I never saw such a lazy dog in my life. I remember when we were staying with you at Monkford (Sir Charles's place in Yorkshire), and we had to be up early to catch a train, it took Fred and me all we knew to get Josh up. We pulled him out of bed, but he crawled back again; so at last we forcibly removed his bedclothes, and made off with them to our own room. Josh pursued us down the

passage, but just then Aunt Louisa's maid came down it, and we yelled out that it was Constance, and Josh, not being exactly got up to encounter ladies, turned and fled back to the shelter of his own room."

Josh was too intently engaged in trying to finish the gooseberries before the others rose to reply to this, and allowed them to laugh on unheeded. Just then the sportsmen did get up, and Josh, having lingered till the last moment, scrambled up and followed them, having filled his coat pockets with the remains of the gooseberries.

The ladies then set off home, leaving the servants to pack up the *débris* of the lunch. Pearl was very quiet and subdued all the way home, partly because she was frightened of Harry and Julia, and partly because she was unhappy about Sir Eldred's apparent desertion of her. She liked Captain Scott well enough, but not nearly so much as Sir Eldred; and the easy way in which the latter had resigned her to the captain, hurt and

puzzled her. She liked a little flirting; what young girl does not? But she was not vain enough to find in it a consolation for every other vexation, as Julia did. She would far rather have been neglected by every other man in the world, if only Sir Eldred had remained her friend. She did not understand her own feelings on this point; she only knew that she liked Sir Eldred very much, and missed him sorely when he left her to the companionship of others.

It was late that evening when the shooters at length returned from the moor, and most of the ladies, who were already dressed for dinner, assembled on the door-step to receive them. They had had a glorious day, they said, and they all seemed in good spirits. Sir Eldred and Mr Brodie were the first to arrive; the latter armed with a bunch of fine white heather, which he presented to Harry, who accepted it all the more graciously because Sir Eldred was standing by. He did not seem to notice her, however, as

she perceived, with considerable pique. He, too, had a sprig of white heather in his hand, and both Harry and Pearl watched anxiously to see to whom he would present it. He appeared in no hurry to dispose of it, but stood among the ladies answering their questions with his usual *nonchalance;* then, as the general attention was diverted by the arrival of four other men, he stepped up to Constance, and handed her the heather quietly. No word passed between them; but she took the heather, as a matter of course, and fastened it into her breast, and Harry and Pearl each heaved a sigh of relief; for they neither dreamed of being jealous of Constance. For a couple of minutes Sir Eldred stood beside his hostess; but then she had to move away to speak to her other guests, and for a minute he remained where he was, watching her. Then, chancing to catch sight of Pearl standing near him, and watching him wistfully, he approached her and remained beside her, saying little him-

self, but allowing her to talk to him, while he watched the other men stroll up. The two last to arrive were Josh and Frank de Vere.

"See the conquering hero comes," cried Frank, who had made some rather good shots that day, and was in high spirits. "I informed you, ladies, at luncheon, that Mr Josh, our future M.P., had killed one bird with his own hand; since lunch, I am proud to inform you that he has wounded another in the leg."

"Oh, you are always chaffing a fellow," growled Josh sulkily, and Sir Charles coloured and coughed testily, for he thought young Frank was forgetting himself.

"Just turn round and show us the back of your coat, my friend," laughed Frank, catching Josh by the back of the arms, and trying to spin him round. "He filled his pockets with gooseberries from lunch, you know; and then the heat and climbing overcame him, and he forgot, and *sat down on them!* ha! ha! ha!"

Laughter enfeebled Frank's arm, and Josh, by a mighty effort, wrenched himself free, and flew into the house, spluttering with rage. He paused once to inquire how soon dinner would be ready, and then hurried upstairs, exhorting the others to "be quick and get ready," so as not to retard the meal further.

"Yes, come on; don't let us keep poor, dear Josh waiting for his dinner," laughed Frank; but here Sir Eldred, seeing the nervous look on Constance's face, and the annoyed one on Sir Charles's, carried the lad off to his own room to prepare for dinner, before he could say anything more.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MOTHER'S FEARS.

IT was on the twelfth of August that the Days were to arrive at Dunkillie, and on the thirteenth Harry and Julia hastened over to Dunkillie to welcome them.

"I should like to bring them back to lunch," said Julia, as she and her sister stood together in the hall after breakfast discussing their plans.

"So we will," assented Harry.

"Hadn't we better ask Constance first?"

"Certainly not. This is our father's house; surely we may ask our friends to it?"

"Of course, dear, but it would be a pity to annoy papa further, and I am sure I can get Constance to consent."

"I intend to ask the Days whether she consents or not," replied Harry coldly.

Julia said no more, but slipped quietly upstairs to Constance's boudoir, where she found her step-mother writing notes.

"Harry and I are going to Dunkillie in our pony carriage this morning," she began sweetly; "can we do anything for you there?"

"No, thank you," replied Constance, surprised by Julia's unusual affability.

"The Days are there now, you know," continued Julia softly. "We thought of calling to see them."

"Had you not better wait till I am over there; then we can all call together?" suggested Constance, thinking that a formal call was not likely to foster the intimacy between the Days and her step-daughters, and that if she accompanied the latter she

would be able to bring them away sooner than if they went by themselves.

"Oh, please, we want to go to-day," said Julia, gentle but resolute.

"Very well. You will be back to luncheon I hope."

"Oh yes." A pause; then Julia added, insinuatingly,—"I should like to ask them over to lunch some day. They have never seen Moncrieffe."

"My dear, what would your father say?"

"Nothing, unless you make him."

"That is not fair, Julia; he disliked the Days before he married me."

"Well, there can't be any harm in having the poor things to lunch; and I should like to show them my home."

"Well, I daresay your father wouldn't mind your having them over to lunch one day," said Constance, anxious to propitiate the girl, but determining to consult Bruce before fixing any day for receiving the Days.

Julia, however, seemed quite content with

this concession, and did not press the matter any further. She slipped away as quietly as she had entered, and Constance resumed her writing again.

Meantime Harry had remained in the hall below, waiting for her sister, and wondering what had become of her.

The pony carriage was at the door, and Harry was impatient to set off. She went to the foot of the stairs, and shouted to Julia in no gentle voice, but receiving no response she was turning back to the door again, when she caught sight of a tall, elegant woman, dressed in black, who was approaching it. The stranger was a pretty woman of five-and-forty, with a pale face, and dark hair and eyes; and though Harry had never seen her before, she felt convinced that it must be Mrs de Vere. The lady came up to the door, and was about to ring the bell when she caught sight of Harry, and advanced into the hall to meet her.

"I suppose you are Miss Moncrieffe?" she

said, holding out her hand—she had heard of the way Miss Moncrieffe had snubbed Fred for employing her Christian name, and did not choose to expose herself to a similar rebuff —"I am Mrs de Vere."

"How do you do?" said the young lady superciliously. She would have liked to do or say something rude, but Mrs de Vere's quiet, self-possessed manner rather disconcerted her.

"I came to see Constance. Is she in?" asked Mrs de Vere calmly, seeing that the less she had to do with Miss Moncrieffe the better.

"I really do not know," replied Harry indifferently. "I will ring and tell the servant to inquire," and she stepped up to the door and rung the bell, just as Pearl came in from the garden with some flowers which she had been gathering.

The girl glanced timidly from Harry to her mother, and hastily embracing the latter, led her away to the drawing-room, which happened to be empty.

"Oh, mother," she whispered, earnestly, as she dragged her in and shut the door, "was that dreadful girl rude to you just now?"

"She tried to be," replied Mrs de Vere, smiling. "But why do you call her so dreadful? Does she make herself unpleasant to you, my darling?"

"Oh yes, she is very unkind to me. And she is *so* rude to Constance. She won't do anything Constance tells her; and she speaks so insolently to her."

Mrs de Vere's face clouded over, and the colour rose to her pale face.

"You must come home then, Pearl," she said, firmly. "I cannot let you stay where you are ill-treated."

"Oh, no, *please*, mother," pleaded Pearl, looking frightened. "Please don't take me away."

"Certainly I shall, my dear. Why do you wish to stay?"

Pearl hung her head and coloured slightly, while tears of distress rose to her eyes.

"It is so pleasant here," she murmured, twisting her handkerchief round her fingers.

"In spite of Miss Moncrieffe?"

"Oh, yes."

Mrs de Vere looked at the girl intently, and the latter seemed to become uncomfortable under the searching gaze, for she flushed deeply, and turned away.

"Can she be in love?" thought the mother anxiously; but just then Constance came in, and Pearl slipped away, feeling sure that her sister would not let her mother take her away if she could help it.

"What is the matter?" asked Constance, as she saw the signs of distress on her sister's face.

Mrs de Vere explained what had passed to her, and wound up by expressing her intention of taking Pearl home with her.

"Oh, you mustn't do that, mother," expostulated Constance. "The Moncrieffe girls aren't very delightful, certainly, but I am sure Pearl is enjoying herself very much here."

"Too much, perhaps," remarked Mrs de Vere significantly; and then she imparted to her elder daughter her suspicion about Pearl. "Do you know of anyone in the house to whom the silly child could have lost her heart?" she wound up anxiously.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Constance, in amazement.

And then something seemed to occur to her, for she grew pale, and looked terrified for a minute. Sir Eldred had not meant to flirt with Harry, yet he had misled her by his manner; and might he not have done the same with Pearl? He had been so kind to the child; and might she not have misunderstood him, as Harry had done? A sickly feeling crept over Constance as this thought occurred to her. Her own little sister! Oh, it was too terrible!

"Is there some one?" asked Mrs de Vere, watching her.

"No one that cares for Pearl," answered

Constance faintly. "Perhaps you had better take her home, mother, but not at once, or Bruce would be angry. He wanted her to stay a long time, you know."

"I will send for her in a week's time. Six days can't do much harm, and it will seem less sudden than taking her away at once. And now for the news that brought me here this morning — Jack is coming home about the end of the month."

The mother tried to speak lightly and cheerfully, but she was very anxious at heart about both her daughters. Pearl was so young, that matters could hardly be very serious with her, but Mrs de Vere was very dissatisfied about Constance. There was a restlessness and, at the same time, a want of spirit about her, which alarmed the mother. She saw that her daughter was unhappy and discontented, yet she could not tell where the real mischief lay, for Constance resisted all attempts at questioning with cold firmness.

Perhaps the poor mother was as much to be pitied as anyone, haunted as she was by nameless fears and shapeless phantoms of evil. She felt that her child was passing through some crisis in her fate, yet she was powerless to assist or advise her, and could only stand apart and watch for results, while events of which she knew nothing were crowding on apace, and might, for all she knew, be bearing Constance away in their resistless current.

In the meantime, Harry and Julia had arrived at the Days' villa in Dunkillie, and been so fortunate as to find their friends at home.

"Oh, you darlings!" screamed Netta, flying out into the road to receive them. "I felt sure you would come to-day, if that step-mother of yours would let you."

And then she fell to embracing them both again, and skipped into the house, with an arm round each of their waists, greatly to the edification of two small street boys, and

of the groom, who opened his eyes as he heard the remark about his mistress.

Harry did not quite like it. She had not gone through a London season for nothing; and she could not help seeing that the Days were not quite like the people amongst whom she had lately been mixing, but she would not acknowledge this to herself; and Julia, who was not out, thought the Days quite a relief after the stupid married people at Moncrieffe.

Harry at once asked the Days to drive back and lunch at Moncrieffe Castle, and after a little demur, Carry consented, and they soon started for the castle, Harry and the two Miss Days driving, and Julia and Mr Day walking, as there was not room for them in the carriage.

Harry felt that this was not at all right, but she found herself powerless to control Julia; and besides, she could hardly make one of the Day girls walk. So she said nothing, and worked herself up into a

thoroughly defiant frame of mind as they approached Moncrieffe, and she felt that she would have to face Constance's disapproval.

But Julia had to face something far worse before she reached home. As she and Edgar Day were taking a short cut across a corner of the Moncrieffe moor, they suddenly came in sight of three shooters in the distance, among whom Julia instantly recognised her father. That he had seen her she knew, for he had excellent eyes; and she hurried on, hoping that he had failed to recognise her companion, and that she might yet reach home in safety.

But soon she heard rapid footsteps behind her, and, looking round, she saw her father striding after her, with wrath in his eyes, and deep lines on his brow. He had made an excuse to his companions on catching sight of his daughter and her companion, and hastened after her, intending to escort her back to the castle.

"Oh, papa! is that you?" she cried, with

affected lightness. "You remember Mr Day, don't you? Harry and I drove down to see Carry and Netta to-day. I told Constance we were going, and she said we had better ask them back to lunch; but as there was not room for us all in the phaeton, I said I would show Mr Day the way on foot."

All this Julia poured out rapidly, anxious to mollify her father, and turn his anger from herself. She was not absolutely desirous to turn his wrath upon Constance, but, as she spoke, it occurred to her that she was shielding herself behind her step-mother's back, and she did not care. What did it matter if her father were angry with Constance? The latter had often got her step-daughters into "scrapes" with their father, and now it was only fair that they should get her into a row in her turn.

As she spoke, Moncrieffe's brow darkened yet more, but he said nothing. His anger was directed more against Constance than his daughter for the minute; but before he

reached home his mood had changed, and he was equally annoyed with them all.

Of course the girls had made themselves disagreeable to Constance about this visit to the Days; and she, anxious to escape their persecution, had told them they might ask their friends to lunch. Of course she had neglected his orders, and her own duty, in doing this; but still there were excuses.

When the trio entered the drawing-room at the castle, they found the Misses Day and Harry seated in it, besides Constance and some of the other lady guests. Carry would fain have made herself agreeable to Mrs Moncrieffe, but the latter calmly ignored her, to the intense indignation of Harry, who considered her friend grossly insulted because Constance talked to her other guests instead of to her.

"Oh, Mr Moncrieffe!" gushed Carry, rising to shake hands with him, "*aren't* you surprised to see us here? Mrs Moncrieffe

was so kind as to send a message to us by Harry asking us to lunch to-day."

This was said with deliberate malice, for though Julia had assured her that Constance *had* sent such a message, Carry herself did not in the least believe it.

"Indeed? I am afraid it is rather a long way to come for luncheon," said Moncrieffe politely; then turning to his wife, he added, carelessly,—"Can you speak to me a minute, my dear? There is something I forgot to tell you before I went out this morning."

But of course the Days, and his daughters, and Constance all knew the real subject he wished to speak about. The latter rose and left the room with him, and he led the way to her boudoir, where they could be alone, without fear of interruption. He did not mean to be severe with her. No doubt she had been weak, and had failed in her duty to him; but are we not all weak at times? and had she not had a great deal to try her? Yet how well she had filled her part hitherto!

Somehow he felt that it behoved him to be particularly gentle with her. Why, he did not exactly know; only the feeling was there, and had been there ever since his anger towards her, resulting from their parting dispute in London, had died away. Since it had gone, he had been haunted by an uneasy dread lest he was too grave and severe for her. He was cold, and she had accused him of not caring for her; and since his return to Moncreiffe he had felt that they were not all a husband and wife ought to be to one another — that something stood between them. So now he spoke to her very mildly; chid her gently for having invited the Days to lunch, and warned her not to encourage them to stay long, or to repeat their visit.

"I never sent them any invitation at all," said Constance quietly, after listening to all her husband had to say.

"Julia says you did expressly."

"And Miss Day said the same just now;

but for all that, I did not do anything of the kind."

"Surely Julia could not tell a deliberate lie?" exclaimed Moncrieffe, much shocked.

Constance was mollified to perceive how readily he believed her word against his daughter's, and she proceeded to explain to him her interview with Julia that morning.

"Of course now there is no need for me to call on the Days," she said, "but I thought that if I went once with the girls, it would be better than letting them go alone."

"Certainly," he acquiesced. "But I am glad to hear something about luncheon was said between you and Julia; she may easily have mistaken your meaning."

"Or more likely she wished the chief burden of your anger to fall on me?" suggested his wife.

"Hush, Constance, you should not speak like that; it is ungenerous," he said, sharply, while a pained look came over his face. "Of course the poor child misunderstood

what you said; it is unkind of you to try and accuse her of such deceitful motives."

Constance flushed, and bit her lip, for though she felt certain Julia had *not* misunderstood her meaning this morning, she saw that she had been foolish to speak as she had to Bruce. Of course it would pain him greatly to detect his child in an untruth, and he would naturally refuse to believe it if possible, and would consequently think his wife cruel and ungenerous to have made the suggestion.

"I believe that my girls are truthful, whatever they are," he said, coldly; and then they both stood silent for several minutes, neither caring to pursue the subject. "Well, I suppose I must be off to rejoin my friends," he said, presently, in a would-be indifferent tone. "No, thanks, I don't think I can stop to lunch to-day. Good-bye; don't bother your head about the Days. I daresay the whole thing has been a mistake," and touching her forehead lightly with his lips,

he left the room. And she listened to his departing footsteps with considerable relief, and then betook herself back to the drawing-room and her guests.

Of course Bruce was angry with her for seeking to cast any aspersion on his child's truth. How stupid she had been to try to open his eyes to Julia's deceit! When Bruce came home that evening, and for several days following, there was a slight constraint in his manner towards Constance; and she felt that she deserved it for her want of tact; though, undoubtedly, it is hard to be treated as the offending party merely because one ventures to point out that someone else has endeavoured to wrong us. Constance felt provoked with Bruce for his blind belief in his girls; but what aggravated her the most was the consciousness that Julia was triumphing over her, seeing her father's coldness towards her, and supposing that he still believed it to be she (Constance) who had sent the Days their invitation.

But after a couple of days Bruce forgave his wife again. He had been considerably offended by her slighting mention of Julia, but after all he believed that she did try to be kind to the girls; and how generally sweet, and pretty, and agreeable she was! And so he forgave her.

The Days spent a very pleasant afternoon, and did not go away till past five o'clock, as it would take them "next to no time," they declared, to walk home, down hill. Julia was in her element now; she, too, had gotten an adorer in the person of Edgar Day. At luncheon, it is true, Mr Day annoyed her considerably by talking a good deal to Pearl de Vere, who sat on his other hand. Miss de Vere was out and out the prettiest girl he had seen for a long time, he decided, and as he did not consider it safe to make too open love to Julia under Mrs Moncrieffe's eyes, he divided his attention pretty equally between the two girls.

Pearl had never seen or heard anything of

him before, and in the absence of anyone else to talk to, she responded readily enough to his advances. She did not particularly like his expression, but he was good-looking and pleasant, and she talked readily to him, little recking of the storm she was raising in Julia's placid breast. But, after luncheon, when the young people (with the exception of poor Pearl, who never ventured with the Misses Moncrieffe, and had to amuse herself with the kinder married women) all went into the garden, Mr Day contrived to make it all right with Julia. He led her away on a lonely ramble, and confided to her his true reason for talking to Miss de Vere at luncheon.

"You know, my queen, that I would never willingly bestow a glance on anyone but *you*," he said, tenderly—for during her visit to Brighton, he had made considerable progress in his intimacy with her. "But if I had followed the dictates of my heart, what would your step-mother have said? Would

she not instantly have flown to your father, and accused me of seeking to engage your affections?"

"She has set him against you already," pouted Julia.

"It is cruel, and shameful of her, my darling, but we will outwit her yet. But do you know I am afraid of your sister too. If she discovered that there was anything *serious* between us—anything beyond a mere flirtation, she is quite capable of betraying us."

"Perhaps she is," agreed Julia doubtfully.

"I am sure she is—she is so vain herself, that she would never forgive me for loving *you* instead of her."

Julia dimpled into smiles at this. She would fain have paraded Edgar's devotion before the eyes of Harry and Pearl, and shown them that she had admirers as well as they; but it was very delightful to her to feel that she had a *secret* which no one suspected. How astonished they would be if they knew! she said to herself.

So she behaved discreetly, and was content when Edgar refrained from paying any of the other girls particular attention, and merely flirted with her a little before the others.

The Days were saying good-bye at the front door, when Moncrieffe and his shooters returned home, having had a good day, and given up shooting early. Immediately Mr Day placed himself in front of Pearl de Vere, who happened to have come up from the garden a minute before, and began whispering to her in a very devoted fashion. She resented the liberty, for, young and inexperienced though she was, she felt that he did not know her well enough to assume this intimate tone towards her. Mr Day cast one eloquent glance at Julia, and she acquiesced in his stratagem with a sigh. Certainly it was hard to see her lover pretending to devote himself to another girl, but—it was for *her* sake after all. So Julia smiled back at her knight, and he continued

to bend over Pearl, while Moncrieffe and Sir Eldred were advancing.

"Is *that* Sir Eldred?" whispered Netta to Julia. "Oh, I was sure it was; I knew him at once from Harry's description."

"I was wanting so to see him, dear," added Carry, sympathetically to Harry.

She had said the same thing before in the morning while they were driving up from Dunkillie, and Harry had felt considerably puzzled how to confide to her friends that she had *made a mistake.* Now she coloured uneasily, and glanced hastily at Pearl, who was regarding her with wondering eyes. What did Miss Day mean by speaking like that? Surely Harry could not be engaged to Sir Eldred?

"I admire your taste, dearest; he is splendidly handsome," added Carry, and Harry turned crimson as she still felt Pearl's eyes on her.

"Oh, he is well enough!" she tried to say, with an off-hand air; and Julia whispered to Netta, with a smothered gurgle of mirth,—

"Oh, *that* is all off! Harry made a slight mistake."

Netta opened her eyes, and Carry, seeing that something was wrong, suffered the subject to drop; indeed, she could hardly have pursued it, as Sir Eldred was now close to them. He greeted Harry with a careless manner, that made Carry open her eyes in astonishment, and then he turned to Pearl, and walked into the house with her. She had been too much overpowered by Mr Day's attentions to resist them for several minutes, for she was too young and timid to understand the art of *repelling* anyone, man or woman; but when she saw Sir Eldred's eye fixed upon her, she turned desperately away from her tormentor, and slipped into the house.

"What a little flirt it is!" thought Sir Eldred, half amused, half aggravated, as he followed the girl indoors.

"So you have made another conquest, Miss Pearl?" he said, smiling down at her in his

kind, elder-brotherly way. "But don't have much to say to that Day, child. I don't know him personally, but I've heard of him, and he's not a nice friend for you. I wonder how on earth he comes to be here?"

"I'm *not* a child!" flashed Pearl petulantly; and then she flew upstairs to her room, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

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